

The Commonwealth may do good by stealth: but as Mark Anthony reminds us: "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones". Many see us lacking the muscle and courage to answer contemporary needs. The Commonwealth's strength as a weight-bearing structure is seen as critically weakened by the imperatives of consensus, the lack of a clear mission statement and failure to live up to its principles. Retrospective articles at the end of 1997 in British newspapers summing up the features of last year made no mention of the "UK Year of the Commonwealth"; still less was there any serious reporting on the Edinburgh Economic Declaration. We are right to claim comparative advantage in many areas. But the message does not get across.

Another weakness, to speak frankly, lies in the slender financial resources deployed to the Commonwealth by its principal funding governments, as a share of multilateral aid. For the industrialised countries, membership of the Commonwealth is cheap and represents a good investment. Canada's 28% reduction in contributions to the CFTC over the last five years was generously reversed by the 9% increase announced at Edinburgh. Britain continues to pay 30% of the gross cost of Commonwealth programmes and overheads. But as a proportion of the British multilateral aid programme, this amounted to no more than 1% in 1996, when Canada's stood at 2.7%. Others gave more, and Malaysia and India have recently increased their contributions to the CFTC sharply. Commonwealth programmes, we are told in our governance bodies, are seen as useful and well-managed: but the marginal pound in the aid vote tends to go to bilateral programmes, not to us. Yet the Commonwealth Secretariat is a demand-driven organisation, responsive to the needs of our member states. Demand for our assistance consistently exceeds the supply of funds to meet it. We could undoubtedly make a greater impact with more resources to sustain our programmes. Must we remain "the stone that the builders rejected"?

Commonwealth Governments often display a certain reticence in acknowledging the Commonwealth as the provenance of ideas they carry forward in other fora. Thus Commonwealth initiatives