



Vancouver skyline

Meanwhile, the focus of attention was shifting away from Britain. In 1951, the word 'British' was dropped from the title of the final communiqué, and from the mid-1960s, meetings began to be held outside Britain. The first one was held in Lagos in 1966; other venues have been Singapore (1971), Kingston (1975), Lusaka (1979), Melbourne (1981), New Delhi (1983) and Nassau (1985).

Canada has now hosted two Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings — the first one being in Ottawa in 1973.

Forum for discussion: the Heads of Government meetings

Heads of Government meetings have a twofold purpose. First, they are an important forum for discussing issues of concern to the world community at large. Second, they are the setting for decisions on Commonwealth co-operation and joint action in service of wider goals.

In 1971, for example, Commonwealth leaders adopted the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles and decided to establish the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation to assist development. In 1973, they set up the Commonwealth Youth Programme to enable young people to take a more active part in development.

The Kingston summit of 1975 appointed a Group of Commonwealth Experts to assist progress towards a new world economic order aimed at narrowing the gulf between rich and poor nations. This commitment was taken a step further in 1977, when a Technical Group was set up to work towards a Common Fund which would stabilise commodity prices.

The 1981 conference culminated in the Melbourne Declaration on north-south issues, which lays down principles for greater justice in world economic relationships. Expert groups were set up to study the global problems of protectionism in trade and of obstacles inhibiting the progress of north-south negotiations.

Half the member countries of the Commonwealth

have populations of less than one million, and this factor was a major preoccupation of the 1983 summit in New Delhi. A study was commissioned on the security and economic problems of small states, and special assistance was recommended to help them. The Goa Declaration on International Security called for a constructive east-west dialogue and the strengthening of international machinery to reduce tension and resolve disputes.

'A touch of healing to a troubled world'

Racial equality has always been upheld as a cardinal principle of the Commonwealth, and this has led to a number of resolutions on Southern Africa at conferences over the years. One of the most significant was the Gleneagles Agreement in 1977, under which Commonwealth leaders affirmed their opposition to apartheid and undertook to discourage sporting links with South Africa.

The meetings have developed a character which is perhaps unique among large international gatherings. Sessions are private, and stylised discussion is avoided. It is 'statesmanship in shirt sleeves'. The keynote is frankness and informality; and the opportunity they afford for genuine personal contact and interaction is especially valued by Commonwealth leaders.

Furthermore, links do not stop at the official level. There are, in addition, 300 voluntary organisations that span the Commonwealth, helping to bring people together in a spirit of friendship and co-operation — organisations such as the Royal Commonwealth Society and the English Speaking Union.

The world-wide, multi-racial character of the Commonwealth enables it to have a bridge-building role, or as Jawaharlal Nehru put it, to bring 'a touch of healing to a troubled world'. In an increasingly complex world plagued by misunderstandings, at least one organisation seems to be successful in bringing diverse peoples together — peoples who might otherwise not communicate at all. ♦



Commonwealth Training Award holders, Cyprus Forestry College

The Commonwealth in action CFTC helps developing nations

The Commonwealth operates in three main ways. First, it is a forum for consultation (which is not just confined to the biennial meeting of Heads of State; consultation also takes place at many other levels). Secondly, it helps to build bridges between rich and poor nations, and thirdly, it provides technical assistance through its own multilateral agency, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation.

The CFTC was established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in 1971 as a way of expressing the Commonwealth spirit in a vital, practical way. The CFTC offers various kinds of assistance. It supplies experts, offers training in

other Commonwealth countries, finances economic studies, and helps countries with their export drives.

In addition, the Fund gives specialist advice to governments, helps to establish new industries as well as to improve productivity in existing ones, and it supports practical co-operation between countries in areas that range from food production to management development.

Most of its resources come from the more developed Commonwealth members; nevertheless, Nigeria is the fourth largest subscriber and India the sixth. Annual expenditure is currently in the region of £30 million.