

Vancouver conference

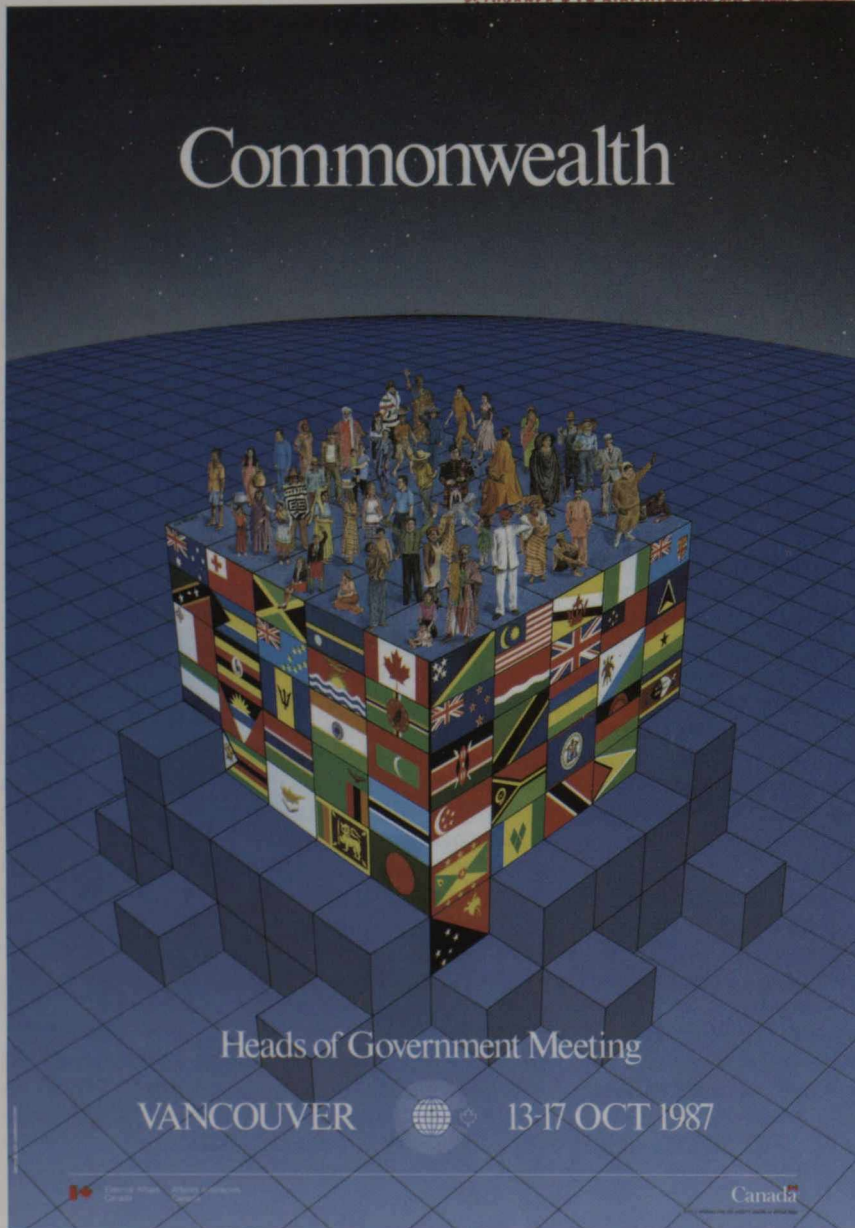
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Summit shows Commonwealth is still a vital force

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years; they speak a common language and share common values, both of which greatly facilitate communication.

They also represent the whole spectrum of humanity — from the very rich to the very poor. Some are technologically advanced while others are struggling to develop their potential. The most populous member is India with over 700 million people; the smallest ones are the island states of Nauru and Tuvalu, each of which has just 8000 inhabitants.

Membership of the Commonwealth does not affect a nation's sovereignty. Each member decides its own form of government and political orientation, so there is a wide range of political systems among the nations that make up the Commonwealth.

Yet despite this diversity, the Commonwealth has strong roots that hold the various countries together. In many ways, it is these roots that make the Commonwealth unique as a world organisation.

The path from Empire to Commonwealth

The modern Commonwealth may seem a youthful institution, but its history goes back quite a long way — to Canada, in fact. Lord Durham's Report of 1839 led to a concept of self-government and national self-respect, which is basic to the Commonwealth idea. It also led — in 1867, under the British North America Act — to Canada becoming the first Dominion, a status which came to imply equality with Britain.

At the 1926 Imperial Conference, Britain and the Dominions were defined as 'autonomous communities, equal in status, united by a common allegiance to the Crown' and 'freely associated as members of the Commonwealth of Nations'. That meeting was followed by the Statute of Westminster in 1931, under which the independence of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa was given legal expression.

The next major step in the Commonwealth's development was taken in the late 1940s with the granting of independence to India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. India's leader at the time, Jawaharlal Nehru, while recognising the advantages of belonging to the Commonwealth, wanted his country to become an independent republic. This meant India would no longer be able to recognise the British monarch as its head of state.

However, the Commonwealth has always been an adaptable body. Its leaders met again in 1949 and agreed that the principle of membership of the Commonwealth should be changed to acceptance of the British monarch as the symbol of association, regardless of whether the member country retained allegiance to the British crown. India, therefore, was able to join.

As more countries gained their independence, so the Commonwealth grew in membership and diversity. Five countries participated in the Prime Ministers' Meeting of 1944. In 1948, the number had risen to eight. In the 1960s, the growth was much more noticeable, as 20 newly independent countries participated in the Heads of Government meeting for the first time. Today, there are 49 independent member states.

Every two years, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meet for a week of intensive discussion held in an atmosphere of informality. This October, it was Canada's turn to host the meeting, and leaders from 49 member nations all over the globe headed for the British Columbia Convention Centre, a dramatic building with a graceful sail-like roof situated on Vancouver's waterfront.

In the past, sceptics have said that the Commonwealth no longer serves a useful purpose — even though it represents one quarter of the world's population. The Vancouver summit proved them wrong. It showed that the Commonwealth is a dynamic, forward-looking organisation, which has developed a momentum all of its own.

A unique and dynamic partnership of equals

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of independent countries that share a common heritage. Their education and legal systems are similar; they have trade and economic links that go back many