

Canada's Role in the Commonwealth



Canada is one of the Commonwealth's strongest supporters and promoters, valuing the role that this organization — with its diversity of races, religions and cultures — can play on the world scene. Cutting across regional and interest blocs, the Commonwealth is seen as a model of multilateralism, an ideal instrument with which to broaden international understanding and consensus. The association also enriches and deepens Canada's bilateral relations with 49 other member countries in nearly all regions of the world and reinforces Canadian foreign policy aims as a whole.

From Canada's perspective, the Commonwealth furthers the Canadian foreign policy agenda through its numerous programs supporting common principles and values. Good governance and the promotion of fundamental political values, as articulated in the 1991 Harare Declaration, are at the heart of the Commonwealth's activities. In a world confronted with many challenges to peace and security, the Commonwealth's ongoing interest in conflict identification, its unique experience with preventive measures and its successes with peaceful resolutions, place it high among multilateral instruments capable of resolving such threats.

The modern Commonwealth has been central to the growth of Canada's role in the world since the end of the Second World War in 1945, and remains a key element in its external relations. Commonwealth membership has offered privileged access to a large group of developing countries, which has helped Canada to play a constructive part in North-South issues and added weight and credibility to Canadian foreign policy efforts generally. The Commonwealth complements the UN's efforts in many areas in which the Commonwealth has experience and expertise. In this way, Canada believes that the Commonwealth can contribute to the strengthening of the multilateral system, utilizing its co-operative and consensus-building abilities to deal with major issues or to contribute to the negotiation and the implementation of multilateral agreements.

The development of the Commonwealth has been a vital part of the Canadian experience over many decades. It eased the change in our post-imperial relationship with Britain. It helped to place the role of the monarch in the contemporary context of Queen of Canada and Head of the Commonwealth. It gave Canada partners in Asia and Africa with whom it shared a heritage of British political and legal traditions and with whom it could communicate through a common language. It strengthened historical ties with the Commonwealth Caribbean and widened ties in the Pacific.

Partnership in the Commonwealth also introduced Canada to the problems of developing countries and provided — first through the Colombo Plan — the opportunity to make an important contribution to technical and development assistance. It encouraged and supported Canada's role in the United Nations. It has permitted Canada to display its North American personality while playing a clearly identified, independent role in an English-speaking forum, and later provided inspiration for Canada to seek parallel institutions that would cement ties with the French-speaking world.

Canada has played a major role in Commonwealth affairs from the onset, and the policies and initiatives of Canadian decision-makers throughout the years have contributed significantly to what the Commonwealth is today. The evolution of the Commonwealth and of Canada's own political independence are closely related.

Canada was the example followed by other dominions in the 19th century in achieving representative government and colonial autonomy. Of particular importance was the case made successfully by Robert Borden in 1919 for separate representation at the Versailles Treaty negotiations and William Lyon Mackenzie King's insistence on a declaration of full autonomy, which resulted in the Statute of Westminster in 1931.