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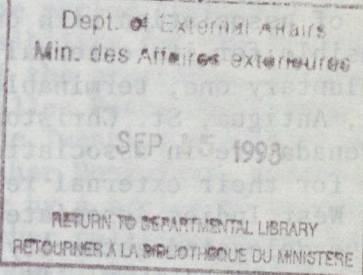
REFERENCE PAPERS

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THE COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth (or Commonwealth of Nations) is a voluntary association of 31 sovereign independent nations, each responsible for its own policies. With the exception of Britain, they share a common history as former British colonies. There are members from each of the six continents and from five oceans; the members comprise peoples of widely different races, languages, religions and cultures. They range from poor developing countries to wealthy industrialized nations like Britain, Canada and Australia.

Extent

In a geographic sense, the term Commonwealth is understood to include fully self-governing states associated with a Commonwealth member for the purposes of foreign policy and defence, protectorates, protected states, trust territories administered by a member on behalf of the United Nations and territories still dependent on a member. Including dependencies, the Commonwealth embraces roughly a quarter of the world's land surface and between a quarter and a third of the world's population.

Of the 31 independent members, 16 have adopted a republican form of government with a president as head of state and 15 have retained a monarchical form of government. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is head of state of Britain, Canada and ten other members. Malaysia has as head of state an elected monarch (the Yang di Pertuan Agong) chosen from among their own members for a five-year term by the nine hereditary Malay rulers of West Malaysia. On attaining independence, two members of the Commonwealth, Lesotho and Swaziland, had their paramount chiefs declared king and head of state. All members recognize the British Sovereign as the symbol of their free association and head of the Commonwealth. (1)

(1) A list of the Commonwealth members showing area, population, form of government and date of independence is attached as Appendix A.

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