

My first words must be of gratitude to the Royal Commonwealth Society for inviting me to this podium from which so many distinguished voices have been raised in the cause of the Commonwealth and of the many issues that have from time to time preoccupied its member states. It seems only a while ago that we were listening here to President Nyerere as he spoke with such quiet passion and controlled eloquence on the problems of international poverty and the need for a new economic order to redress it.

For myself I cannot but recall the last occasion on which I was privileged to speak in this hall in another capacity on the prospects for community in the Caribbean. That was some three and a half years ago, in January 1973, at a time when we were just beginning to discern that a new era in human dialogue was unfolding. How much has happened since that time; and yet how much remains the same.

Today I speak not of one region of the Commonwealth but of the Commonwealth as one region of human endeavour. And I am glad that this opportunity for doing so at the Royal Commonwealth Society arises as I approach in a few days the first anniversary of my assumption of office at the Commonwealth Secretariat -- while I am young enough in office to speak with the voice of expectation and of promise, and yet sufficiently long in office for that voice to be modulated by realism.

And there is need for realism, not merely about the potentialities of the Commonwealth, but about its very character. Unless there is that awareness of what the modern Commonwealth is, we will find ourselves devotees of an outmoded faith, worshipping at a shrine that no longer exists. And, what is far more serious, our lack of perception of the realities of the contemporary Commonwealth will limit our capacities to contribute to its dynamic development.

High among those realities that we ignore at the peril of distortion is the fact that the Commonwealth exists today not because of the past out of which it has emerged but because of the present which it serves and the future which it must help to create. It is not an evolution from empire sustained by memory and justified by sentiment. It is the very negation of empire -- a community of free and equal members sustained by the practicalities of co-operation and justified by the needs of our global society for ever widening areas of dialogue and understanding within mankind's variety.

Within the last few weeks the new Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Malcolm Fraser, gave pointed expression to these realities. Opening the important meeting of Commonwealth Senior Officials in Canberra he said:

"The changing pattern of international relations has altered, and I believe strengthened, the Commonwealth. No longer are the nations of the Commonwealth linked just through Britain. Through the Commonwealth a network of relations have developed between the independent member countries. The links which have grown between individual Commonwealth countries have become at least as important as the longstanding links between each and Britain. The old Empire of Five... is a thing of the past and even if there are some who would look back with nostalgia, the world is better for it."

This was a refreshing attestation from 'down under' -- from a modern Australia that is playing a particularly active role within its Commonwealth region of the South Pacific.