

The Commonwealth

During 1977, the Commonwealth remained a distinctive and effective institution for international consultation and co-operation. Consisting of 36 countries (approximately one-quarter of the world's countries and the same fraction of its population) of various races, languages, cultures and stages of economic development, it has served as an accurate reflection of the world's major problems, and has provided a unique forum wherein equal and sovereign states sharing certain ideals could work together on the basis of consensus. Canada has remained strongly committed to the Commonwealth and the positive role it is playing in helping solve world problems.

The June biennial meeting of heads of Commonwealth governments - the "summit" of Commonwealth activities in 1977—was held in London to honour the Queen's Silver Jubilee. In addition, Commonwealth ministers came together during 1977 at four meetings: the seventh Commonwealth education conference, the biennial Commonwealth law ministers' conference, the Commonwealth finance ministers' conference, and the fifth Commonwealth medical conference.

During the year, in addition to a broad variety of official and non-governmental activities, the Commonwealth strengthened its links with the United Nations, in which it had acquired observer status during 1976. Another matter of particular interest to Canada was the Commonwealth's admittance of Mauritius and Seychelles, which, with Canada, are also members of La Francophonie; the secretariats of the two bodies began to meet regularly during 1977 to exchange information. In addition, the Commonwealth Foundation announced a grant in support of an experimental two-year program of co-operation between the Commonwealth and French-speaking countries of Africa.

Heads-of-government meeting

At the Commonwealth heads-of-government meeting in London in June, a topic of special importance was the situation in Southern Africa. The prime ministers reaffirmed their full support for the struggle for independence in Zimbabwe and Namibia, and for the demands of the oppressed in South Africa. They recognized the need to increase the resources available for humanitarian and technical assistance in that region to support the coloured peoples of Southern Africa in their pursuit of freedom.

Another major topic was the world economic situation in the light of the results of the Conference on International Economic Co-operation and the London economic "summit". Discussion included the final report of the Commonwealth Group of Experts, which made a significant contribution to efforts to evolve a new economic order, with particular emphasis on the problems of developing countries. The heads of government indicated that the Commonwealth had a useful role to play in attaining global consensus on economic affairs, and they considered how it could assist in solving specific problems such as those of commodities, energy, food-production, trade and finance.

Discussion included political, economic and social problems of common interest, including the Middle East, Cyprus, the law of the sea, human rights and the many functional areas in which Commonwealth co-operation is carried on through the Secretariat and related institutions.

Prime Minister Trudeau initiated consultations on two difficult questions of interest to Canada—the threat of at least a partial African boycott of the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton because of contacts in sport with South Africa, and the violation of human rights in Uganda. The first problem was solved in private discussion during an informal weekend at Gleneagles, which resulted in unanimous agreement on a statement of principles on sporting contacts with South Africa. On the second issue, the Commonwealth reaffirmed its support for basic human rights in the clearest terms in the final communique.