

country. Their most recent meeting took place in Cyprus in the fall of 1993. These meetings have a very relaxed feeling compared to the political posturing of some international gatherings. Informal discussion is the rule, and prepared speeches are kept to a minimum.

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings are particularly important to small nations. What other opportunity would the leader of a tiny nation such as Solomon Islands, for example, have to chat informally with the British Prime Minister? Such an opportunity would not arise in the United Nations forum, which is more formal.

One of the most important aspects of the Commonwealth is the "unofficial" Commonwealth of non-governmental organizations, or NGOs. They link thousands of individuals in a vast international network of professional, service and cultural organizations. NGOs such as the Commonwealth associations of architects, of museums, of statisticians and of journalists form the grassroots base of the Commonwealth, and give it its vitality.

The Commonwealth has a permanent office in London, England, called the Secretariat. The staff of 360 people, drawn from some 30 countries, co-ordinates programs and activities; these programs include the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, the Commonwealth Science Council, the Commonwealth Youth Program, and the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Technology Management. Most programs are modest and practical. Canada is the largest financial contributor to Secretariat programs.

For many developing countries, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) is a very important program. All member countries, no matter how small, are encour-

aged to contribute to the agency, so all feel they are partners in it. The CFTC provides technical experts and consultants on a short-term basis, offers education and training opportunities and carries out economic feasibility studies on industries and export markets.

COMMONWEALTH DAY

Imagine young people in 50 countries all doing similar activities related to the Commonwealth on the same day. That's what Commonwealth Day is all about. Celebrated on the second Monday in March every year, this is an opportunity for students and teachers to become more aware of the Commonwealth, its programs and relevance to their lives.

This year, Commonwealth Day is March 14 and the theme is sports, primarily because the XVth Commonwealth Games will take place this year and because sports represent an important means of cooperation among member countries. Queen Elizabeth II, Head of the Commonwealth, will discuss this theme in her annual message to the Commonwealth. In London, England, the Queen will attend a multi faith church service in Westminster Abbey and half of the 2 000 congregation members will be school children.

Commonwealth Day offers a chance to learn more about other countries, other customs a chance to explore new and exciting ideas.

In fact, the idea of nations working together to help developing countries originated with the Commonwealth. In 1950, Commonwealth foreign ministers designed the Colombo Plan to combat poverty in South and

Southeast Asia. Canada, Australia, Ceylon, Great Britain, India, New Zealand and Pakistan agreed to work together on development assistance projects. Soon, other countries joined the plan.

For many years, Commonwealth nations were trading partners. According to a 1932 agreement called the imperial preference, these countries put lower tariffs on each others' goods. Today, the world trading order has changed: Britain is a member of the European Community, Canada is a part of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and also looks forward to increased trade with Asian and Pacific nations.

Life in the Commonwealth family hasn't always been easy. For example, South Africa left the organization in 1961 because of Commonwealth opposition to its racist apartheid policies (see sidebar). There was another difficult period in 1979-80 over Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe).

There have been other international crises, yet the organization has survived, even thrived. One explanation is its unique, informal approach to diplomacy. Another advantage is its size: it is a third the size of the United Nations. And the British legacy members share makes it seem more like a family of equals than a place to confront other nations.

Former Australian diplomat Owen Harries wrote in *Reader's Digest* several years ago: "The rest of the world will continue to be baffled by the Commonwealth. It lacks the might and majesty of the old British Empire. Yet, there is no sign of it coming unstuck. On the contrary, it has found a unique way of transforming the imperial idea into that of a family of nations who find it desirable to keep in touch and help one another, simply because they are a family." ∞