

more generous provision for the programmes they have asked us to carry out and an up-turn in a still-falling trend.

Our main task is to organise the consultation and collaborative functions which give the Commonwealth its strength and relevance. For me this has meant helping to run a series of ministerial meetings. Their conclusions form the mandates of the Secretariat's Work Programme. Often sitting on the Chairperson's right, I have had the chance to observe the Commonwealth in action: the good-hearted exchange of experience and willingness to listen: the humorous informality, enabling Kiribati to address Britain on a basis of absolute parity; small African states politely but pointedly lamenting Canada's withdrawal from the Commonwealth Science Council (CSC); St Vincent protesting with Caribbean eloquence at the loss of preferential access for bananas under the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) regime; John Major being lectured by President René of the Seychelles on the need to empower women - a series of illuminating vignettes which I believe could have occurred in no other organisation.

The overarching meeting is of course the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the last of which was held in October 1997 in Edinburgh. I was privileged to attend all the Executive Sessions but not of course the Retreat at St Andrews. I also played some part in the drafting of an Economic Declaration which with one exception was adopted as it stood by Heads of Government. All CHOGMs seek to have a landmark. Vancouver's in 1987 was the foundation of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). At Edinburgh this Economic Declaration was declared by its Chairman, Tony Blair, to be a fitting complement to the Harare Declaration that was agreed in 1991. I will resist the temptation to lift the veil on the action off the pitch, the conspiratorial meetings which accompany every international meeting, but which at CHOGMs are particularly vivid and intimate. Monsieur Jean Chrétien, a veteran of Commonwealth meetings over the last 25 years, was his usual commanding self, while Mr Lloyd Axworthy made a notable contribution both as a member of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and on his two visits to the Commonwealth Centre (organised by your