

# THE COMMONWEALTH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**T**he first meeting of Commonwealth leaders of the 21st century was held in Coolum, Australia, from March 2 to 5, 2002. Its theme was “The Commonwealth in the 21st Century: Continuity and Renewal.” The Commonwealth today faces challenges that have led it to question how it can remain relevant while preserving its traditional strengths.

The four-day conference provided an opportunity for discussing a range of issues related to the international political and economic situation in a relaxed atmosphere. Although leaders spent much of their time on the issue of Zimbabwe, they also approved the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Terrorism, and a New Agenda for small states. In addition, they issued the Coolum Declaration; this endorsed

the report of the High Level Review Group and reiterated leaders’ support for the fundamental political and economic values of the Commonwealth.

## Zimbabwe

The biggest challenge was to reach agreement on the stance to be taken with regard to the situation in Zimbabwe, where democratic life has suffered tremendous setbacks in recent months. Some leaders believed

that Zimbabwe should be suspended from the Commonwealth before the elections of March 9 and 10, in view of the anti-democratic measures imposed by President Robert Mugabe. Others, including Canada, felt that the Commonwealth should refrain from taking any action until it saw how the elections were conducted. Working under the principle of consensus, leaders finally agreed on a compromise inspired by Canada, whereby a “troika” of the previous, current and next Chairpersons-in-Office would decide on appropriate action upon receiving the report of the Common-

wealth Observer Group about the elections in Zimbabwe. If the report was negative, action could range from collective disapproval to suspension.

In their final Declaration, the leaders reiterated the 1991 Harare Declaration’s commitment to democracy—one of the essential conditions for membership in the Commonwealth—as well as the other fundamental principles of the Commonwealth, including good governance, the rule of law, freedom of expression and the protection of human rights.

Two weeks after the Coolum meeting, the Commonwealth Observer Group presented its report, which contained adverse conclusions. On March 19, the troika therefore decided to suspend Zimbabwe from the Councils of the Commonwealth for a period of one year, effective immediately. The decision will be reviewed after 12 months in light of any progress made by Zimbabwe on the basis of the principles of the Harare Declaration and reports by the Secretary-General. This validates the approach adopted at Coolum of awaiting the election observers’ report, and it reflects the commitment of the Commonwealth to upholding the Harare Principles.



Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (right) and Australian Prime Minister John Howard at the 2002 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Coolum, Australia, in March