

There are also political differences. Some countries, such as Canada, are constitutional monarchies. That means they recognize Queen Elizabeth II as symbolic head of state. She is represented by a governor general. Other Commonwealth nations, such as India, are republics.

So what ties hold Commonwealth members together? In most parts of the Commonwealth, at least some segment of the population speaks English. Many Commonwealth members have similar education systems. And these countries share many traditions in law and administration.

Common law, a system of justice that has been handed down through centuries of British history, forms the basis of law in most English-speaking countries. (In Canada, Quebec is an exception; it follows the legal traditions of the French Civil Code.) This means that for everything, from selling a house, to getting a traffic ticket, to being charged with a criminal offence, legal processes are similar throughout the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth members also inherited the notion of a parliamentary system of government. This means resolving problems through discussion and compromise. Commonwealth leaders have been able to apply that con-

sultative tradition to their dealings with each other.

Canada believes the Commonwealth is important because of its non-threatening, supportive and responsive attitude to members' needs. It can build bridges and generate consensus on delicate questions. The Commonwealth also benefits member states by helping them find solutions to their conflicts and problems.

The Commonwealth dates back to 1887 when the first Colonial Conference created a forum for consultation between Britain and its colonies. In 1931, the British passed a law, the Statute of Westminster, that gave legal status to the independence of Australia, Canada, the Irish Free State, Newfoundland (it was not until 1949 that

Newfoundland joined Canada as its 10th province), New Zealand and South Africa. These, then, were the founding members of what was to become the Commonwealth.

In 1947 and 1948, India, Pakistan and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) became independent and chose to join the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth began to resemble the multiracial organization it is today. In 1957, the colony of Gold Coast became the independent nation of Ghana. It was the first of many African nations to achieve independence and membership in the Commonwealth over the following decade. Many newly formed Caribbean countries, including Jamaica and Barbados, as well as Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia followed suit.

Canada has played an important part in the Commonwealth from the beginning. It paved the way toward self-government with Confederation in 1867. With its size, wealth and experience, Canada became a leader other colonies could follow as they too became independent of Great Britain. Although a middle power in world politics, Canada takes a leading role among Commonwealth nations.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government meet every two years in a different

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LINKS COMMONWEALTH

One of the most obvious characteristics of the Commonwealth is the common use of English. In some Commonwealth countries, such as Great Britain, Canada and Australia, English is the mother tongue, or first language, of a large segment of the population. But in other places, many people learn languages other than English as children. When they go to school, they may study English, and as adults they may use it at work, when they deal with the government, or when they read the newspaper.

Over the years, English has been influenced by the languages native to these Commonwealth members. For example, the name Canada comes from the Huron-Iroquois word *kanata*, meaning village or settlement. *Kiwi* comes from the Maori name for the flightless bird native to New Zealand. The words *bungalow* and *pajamas* have Hindi origins.

Once, the student of English literature read British authors such as Charles Dickens.

Today, some of the finest books in English are being written in the Commonwealth by authors such as Canada's Margaret Atwood, Nigerian novelist, poet and short-story writer Ben Okri, and Keri Hulme, a part-Maori New Zealander.

In many cases, English is not the author's mother tongue. As Indian novelist Vikram Seth told *Time* magazine last year: "The English language has been taken over, or taken to heart, or taken to tongue, by people whose original language historically it was not."

In 1992, four Commonwealth writers made headlines: Derek Walcott, a poet and playwright from Trinidad and Tobago became the first West Indian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature; Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian resident who was born in Sri Lanka of Indian, Dutch, and English ancestry, shared the Booker Prize with Britain's Barry Unsworth; and Rohinton Mistry, born in Bombay and now living in Canada, won the 1992 Commonwealth Writers' Prize.