

Commonwealth NGOs — dynamic session at Dalhousie University

In a five-day meeting, hosted by Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia in late October 1976, 66 representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in 18 countries came to grips with the problem of the role of NGOs in the official Commonwealth association. They concluded their deliberations with the recommendation that Commonwealth heads of Government, when they meet in London, next June, take positive steps to encourage NGO activity.

The participants heard and discussed 12 working papers ranging from the subject of Commonwealth relations to the type of NGO activity that exists in or is acceptable in the "unofficial" Commonwealth.

Several interesting facts emerged in the discussions. There are for example, at least 112 Commonwealth organizations and sources of information listed in one publication of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Some estimates put the number of Commonwealth-oriented NGOs as high as 200. They range from professional associations of architects or lawyers to social service organizations like Canadian University Students Overseas, from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to the Royal Commonwealth Society. The Conference suggested that most NGOs could offer expertise, efficiency and flexibility of approach to some of the problems that face members of the Commonwealth association. They could provide for governments its grass-root contacts.

Government recognition called for

The Conference called upon Commonwealth governments to positively recognize the contribution that NGOs can make, to take steps to stimulate and sustain the growth of NGOs and where there is an identified need, to strengthen co-operation among NGOs in relevant fields of activity. It was also suggested that use be made of the already existing machinery of the Commonwealth, particularly the Commonwealth Foundation, to support the activities of NGOs, especially in social and cultural fields.

Participants at the Dalhousie Con-

At a reception during the Dalhousie Conference, some of the participants pose for this picture. (Left to right): A.S. Talalla, High Commissioner for Malaysia; G. Tout, President, Halifax Branch, Royal Commonwealth Society; F. Neal, Chairman, Student Commonwealth Conference Committee, Ottawa Branch, RCS; Lieut-Cdr. C.T. Gunning, President, Ottawa Branch, RCS; R.S. Leavitt, National Vice-Chairman, RCS, Canada; M. Ramcharan, High Commissioner for Trinidad and Tobago; Dr. H.



ference came from a wide variety of Commonwealth institutions. They were joined by observers and participants from the Canadian Government. Professor Arnold Smith, first Commonwealth Secretary-General and now Lester B. Pearson Professor of International Affairs at Ottawa's Carleton University, gave the Conference the benefit of his unparalleled Commonwealth experience.

Information program essential

One item that exercised everyone was the problem of bringing the work, not only of NGOs, but of the whole Commonwealth association to the attention of the public. The work of the Commonwealth has always been "low-keyed" and practically oriented and therefore considered less than glamorous. Some believe the lack of notoriety has enabled the Commonwealth to get on with its work without undue political involvement. All agreed, however, the Commonwealth information program deserved a higher priority.

Almost all participants at the Conference agreed that the terms of reference and income of the Commonwealth

Tambiah, High Commissioner for Sri Lanka; S.S. Ramphal, Secretary-General, Commonwealth Secretariat; G.A. Norman, National Chairman-elect, RCS, Canada; Prof. Arnold Smith, Past Secretary-General, Commonwealth Secretariat; D. Martyn, Chairman, Toronto Branch, RCS; W. Chakulya, High Commissioner for Zambia; A. Hill, High Commissioner for Jamaica; Dr. R. Moore, High Commissioner for Guyana; B. Graves, National Chairman, RCS, Canada.

Foundation should be broadened and increased. The Commonwealth Foundation was established in 1966 to promote and strengthen links between the professions, their individual members and their societies throughout the Commonwealth. By the end of 1975 the Foundation had dispersed about £2.8 million and was responsible for the establishment of ten professional centres in developing countries.

Declaration of support

The Conference recommended that heads of Government issue a declaration giving encouragement and continued support to the work of NGOs and called upon the Secretary-General to promote collaboration with NGOs in functional activities related to the work of the Secretariat, specially in areas of economic and social development.

It was agreed that recognition should be given to the contributions that are, and can be made by NGOs and that the Secretariat encourage their activities, using their services on a continuing, practical basis. Hope was expressed that the Commonwealth Secretary-General would support another meeting