

# The Commonwealth



# HISTORY

Historically, the Commonwealth was an evolutionary outgrowth of the British Empire. The traditional British policy of allowing considerable self-government in its colonies led to the existence by the 19th century of several dependent states that were populated to a significant degree by Europeans accustomed to forms of parliamentary rule and that possessed large measures of sovereignty. By 1931 they were recognized as having special status within the empire by the Statute of Westminster, which referred specifically to a “British Commonwealth of Nations.” The rapid growth of nationalism in other parts of the empire from the 1920s produced a long series of grants of independence, beginning with that to India in 1947, and required a redefinition of the Commonwealth. In 1947 India and Pakistan became members of the Commonwealth, the first with chiefly non-European populations. In 1948 Burma (Myanmar) became independent and rejected membership. In 1949 India announced its intention to become a republic, which would have required its withdrawal from the Commonwealth under the existing rules, but at a meeting of Commonwealth heads of government in London in April 1949 it was agreed that India could continue its membership if it accepted the British crown as only “the symbol of the free association” of Commonwealth members. That declaration was the first to drop the adjective British, and thereafter the official name of the organization became the Commonwealth of Nations, or simply the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth was also beset by other difficulties, some members opting to withdraw from the organization, as did Ireland (1949), South Africa (1961), and Pakistan (1972), though both South Africa and Pakistan eventually rejoined (the former in 1994 and the latter in 1989). Commonwealth membership grew dramatically in the second half of the 20th century as former dependencies attained sovereignty. Most of the dependent states granted independence chose Commonwealth membership, and the organization has even grown to include Mozambique (joined 1995), which was the first country granted entry that was never part of the British Empire or under the control of any member.

## Differences from other international bodies

The Commonwealth differs from other international bodies. It has no formal constitution or bylaws. The members have no legal or formal obligation to one another; they are held together by shared traditions, institutions, and experiences as well as by economic self-interest. Commonwealth action is based upon consultation between members, which is conducted through correspondence and through conversations in meetings. Each member country sends an emissary, called a high commissioner, to the capitals of the other members. A Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is held every two years. At the meeting in Singapore in 1971, members adopted a declaration that restated the Commonwealth's voluntary and cooperative nature and committed the organization to promoting international peace, fighting racism, opposing colonial domination, and reducing inequities in wealth. This declaration was echoed at the meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1991, when leaders further committed the organization to human rights and democracy.



# Commonwealth members

Britain has huge overseas investments, both government and private, in the Commonwealth. When Britain joined the European Economic Community (later succeeded by the European Union [EU]) in 1973, the trade privileges of member countries began to be reduced. Now Commonwealth members have trade agreements with the EU. Many of the exports of Commonwealth countries go to other member countries. In 1996 the Commonwealth Africa Investment Fund was established to increase investment in that continent. There are also significant educational links between members, as many British teachers travel overseas and many students from Commonwealth members study in Britain. Other cultural links include the Commonwealth Games, a sporting competition held every four years. In addition to independent members, the Commonwealth also comprises dependent territories, which are formally governed by Great Britain, Australia, or New Zealand. Most of the older dependencies are colonies. Dependencies include Anguilla, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, and the Turks and Caicos Islands (Britain); Christmas Island, the Cocos Islands, the Coral Sea Islands, and Norfolk Island (Australia); and Niue and Tokelau (New Zealand). Britain has followed a policy of leading the dependencies toward self-government by creating territorial governments in them; these governments comprise a lawmaking body (often called the legislative council); an executive body (called the executive council), which with the governor is the executive authority; and an independent judiciary. At first government posts are appointive, but an increasing elected element is introduced, as constitutions are altered, until elected officials are made wholly responsible for local affairs. After a colony achieves internal self-government, its legislature may apply to the British Parliament for complete independence. It then decides whether to remain in the Commonwealth.

# The purpose of the Commonwealth

The purpose of the Commonwealth is consultation and cooperation. The sovereign members retain full authority in all domestic and foreign affairs, although Britain generally enjoys a traditional position of leadership in certain matters of mutual interest. There are economic ties in the fields of trade, investment, and development programs for new nations. A set of trade agreements (begun at the Ottawa Conference in 1932) between Britain and the other members gave preferential tariff treatment to many raw materials and manufactured goods that the Commonwealth nations sell in Britain, but the system of preferential tariffs was abandoned after Britain's entry into the European Community (now the European Union) in 1973. Periodically there are meetings of Commonwealth heads of government, but no collective decision made at these meetings is considered binding.

# CURRENT STATUS

The Commonwealth's current highest-priority aims are on the promotion of democracy and development.

„We are committed to democracy, good governance, human rights, gender equality, and a more equitable sharing of the benefits of globalisation.” \*

\* "Aso Rock Commonwealth Declaration,, 2003

Official website of The Commonwealth:

[www.THECOMMONWEALTH.com](http://www.THECOMMONWEALTH.com)



The Commonwealth



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## Our work

Commonwealth organisations are involved in diverse [ACTIVITIES](#) , from helping countries with trade negotiations to encouraging women's leadership, building the small business sector, supporting youth participation at all levels of society and

# INSTITUTIONS

There are three Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations:

- The Commonwealth Secretariat
- The Commonwealth Foundation
- The Commonwealth of Learning



# The Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth Secretariat is the main intergovernmental agency and central institution of the Commonwealth of Nations.

It is responsible for facilitating co-operation between members; organising meetings, including the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM); assisting and advising on policy development; and providing assistance to countries in implementing the decisions and policies of the Commonwealth.

# The Commonwealth Foundation

The Commonwealth Foundation helps civil society organisations to promote democracy, development and cultural understanding.

- Vision

A world where every person is able to fully participate in and contribute to the sustainable development of a peaceful and equitable society.

- Mission

To develop the capacity of Civil Society to act together and learn from each other to engage with the institutions that shape their professionalism and people's lives.

# The Commonwealth of Learning

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) encourages the development and sharing of open learning and distance education. COL has evolved into one of the world's leading distance education providers and leads the international development in distance education along with UNESCO.

# CULTURE

Many Commonwealth nations possess traditions and customs that are elements of a shared Commonwealth culture.

- Sports,
- driving on the left,
- the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy,
- common law,
- widespread use of the English language,
- designation of English as an official language,
- military and naval ranks,
- the use of British rather than American spelling conventions



# Sport

- a sign of sharing a certain Commonwealth culture
- providing a constant in international relationships
- similar sports that are considered quintessentially "British" in character, rooted in and developed under British rule or hegemony

# Commonwealth Games

- the games include sports particularly popular in the Commonwealth
- every four years
- the goal of promoting relations between Commonwealth countries
- the Commonwealth's most visible activity



# LITERATURE

- The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies - every three years
- Commonwealth Writers' Prize



# „Commonwealth” by The Beatles

Tonight Enoch Powell said "Get out immigrants;  
immigrants you better go home"

Tonight [...] Wilson said to the immigrants, „  
You'd better get back to your Commonwealth  
homes"

Yeah, yeah, yeah - he said "you'd better get back  
home".

Now Enoch Powell has said to the folks he said  
[...] the colour of your skin.  
He said he don't care what is [...]

So Ted Heath said to Enoch Powell.  
He said you better get up or else you're gonna [...]  
He said to Enoch Powell "Enoch, you'd better go  
home,,

So Wilson said to [...]  
"C'mon boy, we've gotta swing!"  
We gotta go back to [...]  
And [...]

So Enoch Powell said to Wilson Heath  
"Boy you Commonwealth"

Commonwealth – yes (x4)  
If you don't want trouble  
Than you'd better go back to home

So, I went to Pakistani, I went to India.  
I've been to ole Calcutta (Kolkata) and I've had enough of  
that.

I'm coming back [yes] to England town - yes, welcome.  
And dirty Enoch Powell lend his hand enough in  
Parliament

Oh, Commonwealth - yes  
Commonwealth - yes

Oh, Commonwealth - yes  
Can you hear me? Commonwealth - yes  
Well [...] Enoch Powell you gotta get back to home.

Well I checked up to Australia, I sailed to New Zealand  
You'd better come live with us, we're gonna have some  
fun.

We're going up to India, we're gonna Pakistan.  
We're coming back to Europe and gonna [...], alright.  
[...] Enoch Powell [...]  
[...]

Oh, Commonwealth - yes  
Well, Commonwealth - yes  
Yeah, Commonwealth - yes  
Oh, hear me talking, Commonwealth  
Well that Commonwealth, but it's much too wealthy for  
me.  
[...]