

IN THE RING

A Commonwealth Memoir

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Introduction

‘The Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity’

- Nelson Mandela, after his release from twenty-seven years of imprisonment, 1990

‘The best ever post-graduate course in politics’

- Former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore on the leaders’ Retreat at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)

‘It’s the best club in the world!’

- The former President of Malawi, Dr Hastings Banda, on why he loved being a member of the Commonwealth

‘The Commonwealth’s big enough for all of us’

- Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Head of the Commonwealth, on her family’s deepening involvement in the Commonwealth

‘It is easy to define what the Commonwealth is not’

- Arnold Smith, the first Secretary-General of the Commonwealth (he added that trying to do so was ‘indeed quite a popular pastime’)

Naturally, there have been those who have taken an altogether contrary view. Shortly after he led Zimbabwe out of the Commonwealth in 2003, President Robert Mugabe described the Commonwealth as ‘a mere club. It has become like *Animal Farm*, where some members are more equal than others.’

Yes, the Commonwealth is an organisation that means many things to many people. It’s the world’s oldest international political association of states, yet when I became Secretary-General it was still struggling to establish a clear identity, and perhaps it still is.

What is the Commonwealth, how has it evolved and where is it heading? After eight years at the helm, I could just about predict the questions I would get from any audience I was addressing.

From the bluebloods of Great Britain: 'Why do we have to have the European Union when we've got the Commonwealth?' Or from another, older Commonwealth member country: 'How on earth did Mozambique ever become a member?' Or from the exasperated middle-aged-plus: 'Why can't the Commonwealth do more about Mugabe?' From a student in a developing country: 'Why aren't there more Commonwealth scholarships for my country?' Or, 'How can I get to be the Secretary-General?'

The last question, asked many times, always pleased me as it suggested a bright young person thinking well beyond their normal horizons.

International organisations have sprung up all over the world since the Second World War. Although a number existed pre-1940, the record of the League of Nations gave few people confidence in such bodies. But as transport became easier and people moved more freely, countries with common interests began to formalise their relationships among the like-minded. Country groups came together for reasons of region, religion, security, language and culture.

The modern Commonwealth's beginnings go back to the nineteenth century, when Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand (and, from 1922, the Irish Free State) achieved self-government, which in the early twentieth century was termed 'dominion status'. The Balfour Report of 1926 declared that these countries, and Great Britain, were to be 'equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs'. Though united by a common allegiance to the Crown they freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Regular meetings of prime ministers date from 1907, but the modern multiracial Commonwealth we know today is very much a product of the decolonisation process from the 1940s

to the 1970s, which saw dozens of former British colonies achieve independence.

With India, Pakistan and Ceylon becoming independent in 1947–8, the London Declaration of 1949 dropped ‘British’ in front of ‘Commonwealth of Nations’ and discarded the term ‘dominion’ in favour of ‘Commonwealth member’.

When India declared that it wished to adopt a republican form of government while remaining in the Commonwealth, a constitutional crisis had to be addressed. It was agreed that when India became a republic it would remain a member, and in place of allegiance to the Crown it would recognise the monarch as head of the Commonwealth. Thus Queen Elizabeth II is head of the Commonwealth, but India is still a republic, along with a majority of members.

So emerged a new organisation born of the former Empire, now having eight members, which was to build up to fifty-four members by the time I became Secretary-General in 2000. As my friend and long-time expert on the Commonwealth Professor David McIntyre has observed, the organisation changed from being a small, white, imperial club to a large, multicultural, international association.

Many countries either linked to Britain or to another Commonwealth country decided it was an organisation they wished to join or could not afford not to join. A total of thirty-eight of the fifty-three members do not have Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, but recognise her as head of the Commonwealth. A very small number, notably Mozambique, Rwanda and Cameroon, have been accepted as members of the Commonwealth in recent times even though they are not former British colonies; at one time a part of Papua New Guinea, South-west Africa (now Namibia), Rwanda, Samoa, part of Cameroon and Tanganyika (part of modern-day Tanzania) were in fact former German colonies. On the other hand, some independent former British colonies such as Aden (now Yemen), Palestine and Jordan, Egypt, Sudan and Burma (now Myanmar) elected not to join.

The Commonwealth has no written constitution. Many leaders, and in fact Queen Elizabeth II herself, have referred to the concept of family as a partial explanation for the Commonwealth's continuing existence. The Commonwealth exists because its members feel they have a natural, family-style connection. They have a shared past and in the main a shared common language and institutions.



The Secretary-General position was established in 1965. A year earlier, at the Commonwealth prime ministers' meetings in London, the President of Ghana, the very ambitious Kwame Nkrumah, had proposed that there be an independent secretariat for the organisation, answerable to all member governments collectively.

This proposal was not universally welcomed, especially by a group now disparagingly referred to as the 'old white Commonwealth', namely the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand. I believe that there were some at the time who did not expect the Commonwealth to survive this diplomatic stand-off. Newer members were unhappy with what they saw as the old members' preoccupation with the Cold War. The more pressing issue for the Commonwealth, declared Dr Nkrumah and others, was decolonisation and the gap between the First World and the Third. What was needed was a secretariat to provide the association with administrative strength and the ability to coordinate policy. The United Kingdom, Canada and Australia were all strongly against. New Zealand was silent, but in the end the old guard decided they should go with the new members, and so the line was crossed.

Many people believe, and I certainly agree with them, that the most significant advance in the evolution of the modern Commonwealth as we know it today was this setting up of the Secretariat in 1965. Until that year the management of the

organisation had been firmly entrenched in the British Cabinet Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office, part of the Whitehall complex of government departments in London.

The first Secretary-General was former Canadian diplomat Arnold Smith, who began work in August 1965. Smith wrote cogently and somewhat self-effacingly about this period. What had emerged was the reluctance of the older group to have any obstacle between them and the British government. For the newer members it was about separating themselves a little more from the machinery and civil servants of the former colonial master. A secretariat central to the organisation, serving all equally, would principally assist their economic development.

Despite the intensity of the debate, and continuing rear-guard resistance from the Commonwealth Relations Office, the Commonwealth now had a full-time Secretariat. And thirty-five years after the establishment of the Secretariat, it was my job to steer it through the first decade of the new millennium.



Early arguments over the status of the office of Secretary-General ranged from those who wanted just a secretary to those who wanted someone to work more independently. In fact, at the time of writing I still hear comments from some governments that the incumbent should be more Secretary and less General. But more on this later.

My predecessors, my successor and I, however, appreciated the fact that the Secretary-General would have a rank akin to a senior high commissioner. He or she would rank as an equal with leaders at the conference table and would be employed by the Secretariat. These last two points were strongly and unsuccessfully resisted by the British in 1965. They preferred that the Secretary-General sit in the middle of the circle of leaders on his or her own – so there could be no direct contact during meetings – and they insisted that they, through their Commonwealth Relations Office, be the employer. A second unsuccessful proposal.

As with many international organisations where governments are the shareholders, there is rarely agreement on the qualifications or characteristics of the chief executive or even senior staff members. Invariably they will oscillate between wanting a strong, forthright person, and wanting someone who will ‘just take the minutes’.

Nevertheless, there’s a job to be done, and on many issues the Secretary-General just has to do what he or she thinks best as there are many unexpected situations that do not fit easily into what’s known as ‘the area of responsibility’ or have not been mandated by leaders of government or the ministers.

The Commonwealth for which I have the highest level of familiarity has for over sixty years been getting these things right, but nothing ever remains static.