

Commonwealth Day Message, 8 March 2010: from Her Majesty the Queen, Head of the Commonwealth

Today's societies are constantly seeking ways to improve their quality of life, and science and technology play a vital part in that search.

Experimentation, research and innovation, mean that more opportunities for improving people's lives exist today than ever before. Take long distance communication, where the obstacles of time and geography have been dramatically reduced: people can now use mobile phones to be in instant contact virtually anywhere in the world, be it with a medical centre in the Himalayan mountains in Asia, a Pacific island school, a research facility at the South Pole, or even the international space station, beyond this planet altogether.

Advances in modern telecommunications are also having a marked economic effect on people from developing nations in the Commonwealth, helping to transform small to medium-sized businesses.

The internet is playing an important part in helping to nurture these fledgling markets but, as yet, it still remains an unaffordable option for too many of our Commonwealth citizens.

Progress in the fields of healthcare, manufacturing, and education have, for the most part, helped improve people's lives throughout the world. In the health sector, the Commonwealth has shown how collaborative schemes can successfully assist member states to fight pandemics and diseases.

In making these advances the Commonwealth recognises that the best forms of innovation are those that unite, and help build resilient partnerships and better societies as a whole.

This is particularly important for the more than half of the Commonwealth citizens who are under 25 years of age. It is vital that their potential to build on the exceptional scientific expertise that exists in member states is also fully supported through education and social development. The Commonwealth understands this, and should continue to aid and encourage our young people to participate in the exciting new opportunities that lie ahead, in the knowledge that progress is something which must be sustained and shared by all.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day message, 9 March 2009

This year the Commonwealth commemorates its foundation sixty years ago. The London Declaration of 1949 was the start of a new era in which our member countries committed themselves to work together, in partnership and as equals, towards a shared future.

We can rightly celebrate the fact that the founding members' vision of the future has become a reality. The Commonwealth has evolved out of all recognition from its beginning. It has helped give birth to modern nations, and the eight original countries have become fifty-three. We are now home to nearly two billion people, a third of the world's population. Across continents and oceans, we have come to represent all the rich diversity of humankind.

Yet despite its size and scale, the Commonwealth to me has been sustained during all this change by the continuity of our mutual values and goals. Our beliefs in freedom, democracy and human rights; development and prosperity mean as much today as they did more than half a century ago.

These values come from a common responsibility exercised by our governments and peoples. It is this which makes the Commonwealth a family of nations and peoples, at ease with being together. As a result, I believe we are inspired to do our best to meet people's most pressing needs, and to develop a truly global perspective. That is why the modern Commonwealth has stood the test of time.

But as we reflect upon our long association, we should recognize the challenges that lie ahead. Nearly one billion people of today's Commonwealth are under 25 years of age. These are the people that this association must continue to serve in the future. It is they who can help shape the Commonwealth of today, and whose children will inherit the Commonwealth of tomorrow.

To help them make the best of their opportunities, our young men and women therefore need the opportunity to become active and responsible members of the communities in which they live. I am pleased that the Commonwealth recognizes this, and is determined to continue to put young people at its centre.

The call that brought the Commonwealth together in 1949 remains the same today. Then we joined together in a collective spirit – built on lasting principles, wisdom, energy and creativity – to meet the great tasks of our times. As the Commonwealth celebrates its sixtieth birthday, its governments, communities and we as individuals should welcome that achievement. Together, we should continue to work hard to deal with today's challenges so that the young people of today's Commonwealth can realize their aspirations. In that way, we can look to the future with confidence.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day message, 10 March 2008

Last year, Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Uganda on the edge of Lake Victoria and agreed to an Action Plan for tackling climate change. It was an appropriate place to do so: from there, the waters of the River Nile begin a three-month journey to the Mediterranean.

The Nile, throughout history, has served humankind in many ways. But for all its impressive size and importance, this river is a fragile eco-system; and its vulnerability grows with the number of people dependant upon it, so that a single incident of pollution upstream may affect the lives of countless numbers downstream.

The example of the Nile illustrates many of the challenges facing the global environment as a whole which cannot alone sustain our lives as once it did. The competition for fresh water by a growing population is itself becoming a source of potential conflict. Our own attitudes to the environment, and the use we put it to, may have consequences for people on every continent and for every ocean and sea.

The impact of pollution falls unequally: it is often those who pollute the least – notably in the world's least-developed nations – who are closest to the razor's edge: most affected by the impact of climate change and least equipped to cope with it.

And it is important to remember that the environmental choices available in some countries may not be an option for others. In some parts of the world, for example, fossil fuels can be used more sparingly and buildings can be made of more efficient, sustainable materials; but it is far harder to expect someone to adapt if he or she relies on the trees of a local forest for fuel, shelter and livelihood. If we recognise the interests and needs of the people who are most affected, we can work with them to bring about lasting change. Happily, this approach has always been a strength of the Commonwealth, and awareness of environmental issues is now widespread, with a determination that future generations should enjoy clean air, sufficient fresh water and energy without risking damage to the planet. Few are more aware or energetic in confronting climate change than young people, and we should support them.

In the Commonwealth, governments, businesses, communities and individuals should each strive to match words and good intentions with deeds. Every contribution has its part to play. Whatever we do, wherever we live, our actions in defence of the environment can have a real and positive effect upon the lives of others, today and into the future.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message, 12 March 2007

Today's Commonwealth is home to nearly a third of the world's population. It's almost two billion citizens come from so many faiths, races, cultures and traditions.

I think that one of the reasons for the success of this organisation is that it draws not only on certain shared values, but also from the principles and practices of everyday life, which can be observed day after day in the cities, towns and villages of our 53 member countries.

Over thousands of years, the very basis of community life has been the pooling together by individuals of their resources and skills. Rather than having to be good at everything, people were able to practise their own skill or craft. The lesson of community life is that to flourish we must help each other. To do this, there has to be a sense of fairness, a real understanding of others' needs and aspirations, and a willingness to contribute.

Despite its size and scale, the Commonwealth to me is still at heart a collection of villages. In close-knit communities like these, there are beliefs and values we share and cherish. We know that helping others will lead to greater security and prosperity for ourselves.

Because we feel this way, our governments and peoples aim to work even more closely together. And as individuals, we find that taking part in Commonwealth activities can be inspirational and personally rewarding.

In today's difficult and sometimes divided world, I believe that it is more important than ever to keep trying to respect and understand each other better. Each and every one of us has hopes, needs, and priorities. Each of us is an individual, with ties of emotion and bonds of obligation - to culture, religion, community, country and beyond. In short, each of us is special.

The more we see others in this way, the more we can understand them and their points of view. In what we think and say and do, let us as individuals actively seek out the views of others; let us make the best use of what our beliefs and history teach us; let us have open minds and hearts; and let us, like the Commonwealth, find our diversity a cause for celebration and a source of strength and unity.

This is a thought worth bearing in mind as we gather on Commonwealth Day: we are a thriving community; we value our past; we make the most of our present; and we are working together to build our future. By respecting difference and promoting understanding, that future will be a better one for us all.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message, 13 March 2006

There are few feelings more satisfying than waking to a new day with a sense of wellbeing. Good health is a precious gift.

Yet many do not share in this. Some forty million people today are living with HIV/AIDs, well over half of whom are Commonwealth citizens.

Half a million women die each year in pregnancy and childbirth - and the death of any mother has huge consequences for the rest of the family.

Yet very many of these deaths are preventable with adequate healthcare.

Ignorance and lack of understanding about these issues sometimes breed uncertainty, even fear and the inclination to turn from those who are unwell. But we know, for example, that someone who is HIV positive can, with proper support, lead a full and rewarding life.

I am pleased that Commonwealth governments are playing their part in tackling disease and improving health for all. Polio, for example, used to cast its shadow across many countries.

Today, thanks to concerted international action, just a handful still need to eliminate polio. The same approach and commitment to other global scourges, such as malaria and tuberculosis, can achieve equally impressive results.

There is also much we can do through non-governmental organisations and especially as individuals. Poor health is sometimes linked to the way we choose to live. But many of us can often take steps to eat better food or take more exercise. We can also as communities work to improve our surroundings to make them cleaner, safer places in which to live.

The importance of good health is so wonderfully exemplified on the sports field. Sporting events can be the spur to extraordinary human achievement. Sport also demonstrates the value of co-operation and team-work, and the importance of mental and physical control.

In Melbourne, in just a few days' time, I will be opening what are known as "The Friendly Games". Commonwealth athletes will gather once more in a spirit of goodwill and fellowship, and will strive to achieve new heights of excellence.

As we watch our finest sportsmen and women compete, we will see clearly what exercise at the very highest level can contribute to both body and spirit.

There is a traditional proverb which says, "He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything." This year, as governments search for new ways to tackle these important challenges, we as individuals can also play our part so that, in pursuing health and vitality for all, we bring hope to the world.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message, 14 March 2005

Of the nearly two billion citizens of the Commonwealth, more than half are under the age of twenty-five. That provides our association with a strong foundation for the future. Of course, we all face significant challenges. Some people live in conditions of conflict or insecurity. Others have suffered the impact of natural disasters, such as flooding or hurricanes, which can cause great damage to their communities and countries. Quite how destructive this can be became apparent with the hurricane in the Caribbean last September and of course the devastating Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami.

Overcoming these global challenges, whether as individuals or nations, depends on human ingenuity and commitment. It involves young people in particular having the chance to develop their talents and their abilities – without being held back by inequality. In my lifetime, I have often seen that when people are encouraged to develop their skills of writing and reasoning, they are well placed to contribute their ideas and energies towards building a better future.

The key to unlocking human potential, and creating opportunity, is education.

Education is sometimes described as the golden thread that binds the Commonwealth. Our shared use of a common, world language – English – has underpinned a long and rich tradition of educational co-operation. With our shared practices and similar systems, an extensive network of scholarships, and many examples of excellence, much has been achieved.

That work continues as the Commonwealth responds to today's new challenges. In our association, where around 75 million children lack access to basic education, one clear objective is the UN Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015. Another is mitigating the effects of HIV and AIDS, two-thirds of whose sufferers around the world are Commonwealth citizens, and which in some member countries each year causes the death of more teachers than can be met by newly qualified replacements. A third objective is to expand distance education, through bodies such as the Commonwealth of Learning – based in Canada – which encourages Commonwealth countries to pool their expertise. Knowledge-based economies are the key to future prosperity, and overcoming technological and other inequalities will be much in the minds of Commonwealth Heads of Government when they meet in Malta in November.

For all of us, knowledge is a life-long journey. Education is a precious gift which should be available to everyone, young and old. Not only does it equip us with the skills and the intellect to overcome the problems we face; it also increases our understanding of – and respect for – other people, whatever our differences may be. Perhaps Nelson Mandela put it best when he said, “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. To everyone throughout the Commonwealth who is working towards this worthy goal, I extend my heartfelt thanks.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message, 8 March 2004

The lives of many of my generation were profoundly changed by a world war fought in the name of freedom. I have often reflected with pride on the huge contribution made by the peoples of the Commonwealth to that cause of liberty in which millions perished.

In the years following the war, a succession of countries emerging into independence chose to join the Commonwealth as free and equal members. As a result, the Commonwealth became rooted in all parts of the world and developed into the modern organisation we know today.

Democracy, national self-determination, individual liberty and human rights - all these are fundamental to that which binds the Commonwealth together.

The importance of these principles was clearly in the minds of Commonwealth leaders during their discussions at last December's summit in Abuja, Nigeria. Living up to principles is never easy. It can involve difficult and painful decisions. But the affirmation of those values provides common ground for the Commonwealth as a whole to grow stronger.

The Abuja meeting also made the crucial link between democracy and development. Democracy is important to sustained development - and underdevelopment can be democracy's greatest threat.

Nowhere is freedom perfectly realised - and its enemies are not only those who terrorise and torture. They are also hunger, poverty, disease and ignorance. That is why it is important for the Commonwealth to do all it can to tackle these challenges directly, whether in alleviating poverty or in promoting education and health. It is also essential to strengthen the rule of law, protect democratic freedoms and build strong civil societies.

I firmly believe that if the Commonwealth is to increase its role as a force for good in the world, strengthening democratic freedoms must remain at the heart of its purpose.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message, 10 March 2003

Among my cherished memories of my Jubilee celebrations last year were those connected with the Commonwealth - in particular the visits to Jamaica, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

There was also the undoubted success of the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester - both as a great sporting and Commonwealth occasion, and as a tremendous expression of the host city's community spirit. Launching the Baton Relay from Buckingham Palace on Commonwealth Day last year was one of the many colourful events leading up to the Games.

A few days before, I had opened the 2002 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Coolom, Australia. That summit charted a new course for the Commonwealth, confident of the important contribution the association can play as a force for good in the world.

What we have in common makes the choice of this year's theme for Commonwealth Day, 'Partners in Development', so fitting. We are reminded daily that we live in an interdependent world. And yet there exist great global inequalities, with millions living lives of deep poverty and deprivation, which present a great and constant challenge to the notion of the Commonwealth.

Under these conditions, peace is often more difficult to sustain while precious natural resources and the environment are threatened, economic growth and activity may be impeded as well as the benefits of modern technology denied to many.

Working in partnership is essential if the nations of the earth, whether they be developed or developing, are to build a better, more secure and more sustainable world. Only together can governments and peoples create just, open and democratic societies.

And through a sense of partnership and mutual respect we should be able to recognise that we all share a common humanity, regardless of who we are or where we may be from.

In all this, the Commonwealth has much to offer. It is a unique global grouping, spanning every region of the world and including in its membership countries of all sizes and stages of development. It is an association of peoples as well as governments and, as we particularly celebrated last year, it is a body which values the richness of its diversity.

The special role of the Commonwealth in development was spelt out once again in the Coolom Declaration and at the meeting of the Commonwealth Finance Ministers in London last September.

2002 was for me personally a special year - and it was also an opportunity to recall those elements of my life, notably the Commonwealth, which have been of enduring importance. Appreciating just how far the Commonwealth has developed in the last fifty years is surely a cause for great hope in the future.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message, 11 March 2002

Over the last fifty years the Commonwealth has undergone a remarkable transformation from an association defined by its history into the modern, multicultural organisation we know today.

Across those years, it has been the privilege of many of us to witness that evolution; to see at first hand the contribution made by the Commonwealth's leaders, as evident in Australia last week; and to share in the enthusiasm and warmth of its peoples.

Today, the Commonwealth is a meeting place for North and South, East and West. It is built on diversity - which is why this year's theme, "Celebrating Diversity", goes to the heart of the association.

Politically, the Commonwealth sees its diversity as a strength. That was certainly true of its invaluable contribution to the ending of Apartheid in South Africa. The practical assistance it is able to offer in such crucial areas reflects the kaleidoscope of its membership and its expertise.

As a result, the Commonwealth was able to work with all the different communities of what is now proudly called "the rainbow nation". Bridging social and political divides has also been a feature of the Commonwealth's continuing work in seeking to encourage democracy, good governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

In all this, we recognise that promoting diversity is not just tolerating difference. Living together as neighbours needs more than that. The true celebration of diversity involves reaching out, recognising and embracing difference, and in so doing enriching our lives.

It requires respect for others and a readiness to learn from them; recognising that we have duties as well as rights; and seeking to leave the world a better place than the one we inherited.

As each of the last fifty years has passed, so too has our appreciation of the contribution made by the Commonwealth, an association of peoples as much as it is of governments, bound together by ideals as well as interests.

If the Commonwealth is to remain a force for good, we must ensure that those ideas are carried forward by the millions of young people across the world who are its future - so that they too can celebrate and build on the diversity of this unique organisation.

The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message, 8 March 1993

This year on Commonwealth Day, I am asking you all to think about human values. I know from the many letters I receive from young people that their generation cares deeply about the rights of the individual, about the sufferings of others and about making a better world for us all to live in. I believe the youth of the Commonwealth is well placed to give a lead in showing how human values can be improved.

We share the same world but we do not share the same opportunities. Everyone wants to be free from poverty and hunger, disease and discrimination, to have access to education and to live in a safe environment. People everywhere want to be able to play a full part in the democratic government of their countries and to live in freedom, protected by just laws. These aspirations were endorsed by all the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth when they met in Harare in 1991, and much has been achieved since then in fulfilling them.

In societies where constitutional rights are assured, cooperation between all citizens becomes more natural and more fruitful in tackling the major problems we face. The achievement of one human value can help to achieve others. We should all aspire to raise the standards of life in our countries, to achieve a more prosperous and equitable society and to exercise a powerful influence for peace within and between nations.

None of this is easy to bring about because the establishment of human values implies duties as well as rights. If we want to exercise and enlarge our rights and opportunities, we have to safeguard the rights and opportunities of others. We should look for chances to give service just as eagerly as we look for benefits for ourselves.

The young people of the Commonwealth have the future in their hands. May they keep their vision of human values alive and their determination to achieve them undiminished. And may our fifty nations, sharing our experience and working together to enhance the quality of life, send an example to the rest of the world.