

Secretary-General's message, Commonwealth Day 2009

COMMONWEALTH DAY MONDAY 9 MARCH 2009

In 2009, we celebrate the fact that the modern Commonwealth is 60 years old. Its antecedence is much longer, stretching back to the 1870s. Its future can be longer still, if it is true to its theme for 2009: "The commonwealth@60 – serving a new generation."

The Commonwealth has stood the test of time. It stands tall as an organisation of shared values, dedicated to protecting and advancing its principles. It has been flexible and dynamic in meeting the changing challenges of its times, and sensitive to the needs of its smaller and weaker members. It has always been a part of the wider global community. As a champion of democracy, development and diversity, the Commonwealth has a powerful story to tell. It is bonded together as a community both of governments and of peoples.

The London Declaration of 1949, which brought us into being, saw the far-sightedness of eight countries constituting themselves anew. In so doing, they made the Commonwealth the first real example of an international community representing a collective, consultative, mutually respectful approach to international relations. Nehru put it this way: 'if you approach another country in a friendly way, with goodwill and generosity, you will be paid back in the same coin, and probably in even larger measure'. Of such vision was the Commonwealth born.

Yet our greater task this year is to look straight ahead – and ask how we can continue serving a new generation in 2009 and beyond.

What sort of 21st Century will our young people inherit? Will they know greater peace and prosperity than their parents? Will they exercise their most basic entitlements to food and education, health care, a vote? The Commonwealth has always had an eye on the people and the tasks of tomorrow. Now, it must be prescient again in safeguarding and promoting the guarantors of the best hopes for its future: its young people.

At the international level, the Commonwealth can argue that young people be both seen and heard at the global decision-making table, and that the planet itself must be preserved for their use. At the national level, the views of young people must be heard and acted upon in every corner of public life, and the contributions of the young should be embraced. At the community level, we should continue to instil in young people a sense of shared responsibility. At the level of individual young people, we must continue to build both skills and a sense of self-belief. These pressing tasks share the urgency of the times.