

Submission of the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia

*'Australia, the Commonwealth and Africa:
Existing channels, untapped potential'*

In this the 60th anniversary of the founding of the modern Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia presents its compliments to the Committee. Below are four respects in which Australia's membership of the Commonwealth provides important openings for Australia's future relationship with Africa.

1. 'Politics'

In view of the large number of African states, 'Africa matters' in advancing issues of global concern. Increased Australian credibility, goodwill and influence in Africa will serve therefore to increase Australia's ability to shape global issues of importance to Australia. In the Commonwealth, and in particular in its Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM), Australia has an existing, well-established and congenial multilateral forum through which to engage directly with a large number of African countries. Australia is an important member of the Commonwealth and the 3rd largest contributor to the organisation. In no other major global forum does Australia enjoy comparable advantages in providing leadership. Australia will host the 2011 CHOGM. By invigorating its Commonwealth political connections Australia will advance its national interest and its international role and assist in the building of consensus on shared concerns with a wide range of countries (such as those confronting the Cairns Group).

Special mention should be made of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). This is a unique tool for fostering adherence to international standards on human rights, democratic governance and the rule of law. It matters to Australia to ensure African support on CMAG issues that can advance Australia's political concerns and interests (for example in relation to non-African situations such as Fiji).

2. 'People'

The Commonwealth is about much more than CHOGM or CMAG. It is a rich and vibrant bundle of civil society networks, Commonwealth-wide Professional Associations, and vital people-to-people links that are unmatched by any other global network. Australians are important members of bodies such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA), the Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association (CMJA), the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). They are prominent too in many of the smaller organisations like the Commonwealth Nurses Federation. These resilient and established groupings provide channels for developing relationships, the pursuit of a wide variety of objectives, and oversight and advocacy on important issues of principle. African membership of Commonwealth civil society is important. Australian support serves to

foster a ready-made network of like-minded individuals and groups able to speak up on issues of concern to Australia. CRTA recommends in particular that the Committee consider how the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association might be assisted to enhance its existing, but perhaps under-utilised, mechanisms for opening and improving bilateral relationships with African countries.

3. 'Business'

Australian businesses' existing economic relations in Africa are primarily with Commonwealth countries. Africa can be a challenging yet rewarding investment environment, and Australian investment is growing, in particular in the mining and mining services sectors. The Commonwealth connection presents Australia with notable advantages over other investors interested in African resources and markets. The English language, shared legal traditions and institutions, and other cultural legacies make doing business in Commonwealth African countries a relatively familiar experience for Australian enterprises. More attention, however, ought to be paid to maximising the Commonwealth connection in strategies to advance Australian business relations in Africa. The current chair of the Commonwealth Business Council is an Australian. Australian business activity can have a more sustainable and empowering 'development' than aid programmes. Commonwealth African countries can, moreover, become bases for regional business opportunities extending even into non-Commonwealth African countries.

4. 'Development'

Australia's aid programme to African countries is changing and growing. More proactive engagement in various Commonwealth forums, events and mechanisms would help Australian policy-makers better conceptualise and sharpen our development assistance programmes in Africa and more generally. In particular, Commonwealth Ministerial-level meetings (on Health, Gender, Law, Education and so on) provide excellent venues for building direct relationships with African counterparts for the furtherance of bilateral assistance programmes. Drawing on its recognised expertise in agricultural research, for example, Australia can play a leadership role in addressing human resource development in African agriculture and food security through innovative CFTC (Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation), university and other schemes.

Overview: 'existing channels: untapped potential'

The Commonwealth represents an existing, still largely untapped resource for Australia, despite Australia being a leading member. On bilateral issues with African countries, it provides the platform of familiar shared values, and a variety of people-to-people links. On a continental and global level, as Australia increasingly views itself as a 'middle power' building consensus on global issues, including through multilateral fora, African support is crucial to securing of the necessary agreements and to the mounting of action on global concerns. The Commonwealth is a means to harnessing African support. The CRTA would be pleased to respond to any questions the Committee may have on the role of Australia's Commonwealth links in future relations with African countries.