

The Commonwealth of Nations

The Commonwealth is a worldwide association of nations and their dependencies, whose members share a common commitment to promoting human rights, democracy and economic development. All members accept the British monarch as the symbolic head of the Commonwealth. It is sometimes called the British Commonwealth of Nations or the Commonwealth of Nations. All the members, except Mozambique, were at one time or another a colony of the British Empire, but now they are all independent countries. There are fifty-two countries which form this organization :

Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Brunei, Cameroon, Canada, Cyprus, Dominica, Fiji, The Gambia, Ghana, Grenada, Guyana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Kiribati, Lesotho, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua, New Guinea, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, United Kingdom, Vanuatu, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

The Commonwealth was established December 31, 1931, to foster multinational cooperation and assistance as a voluntary association that evolved from the British Empire and has adopted its own flag. In addition to helping each other out, the organization seeks to foster good will and friendship among its members by holding Commonwealth Games which are similar to the Olympics but are limited to participation by the member countries.

Many of the members of the Commonwealth have a parliamentary system of government and share many customs and traditions as a result of their association with Britain. English is the official language of many of its members. The second Monday in March is celebrated as Commonwealth Day and Queen Elizabeth presents an annual message to all the member countries.

In 1931, the Statute of Westminster officially proclaimed the Commonwealth a free association of self-governing dominions united by a common allegiance to the Crown. As such, the members were allowed to join international organizations as independent nations.

In 1949, the prime ministers of the Commonwealth countries issued the London Declaration. This declaration changed the membership in the Commonwealth from one that was based on allegiance to the British Crown to one in which its members agreed to recognize the British king or queen as a symbol of the organization and the head of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is administered by a Secretariat. This really is a place for sharing information about trade. It is headed by a secretary-general who is elected from the diplomats and government ministers of the members. He/She is responsible for carrying out programs which the countries agree to develop and promote. The less-developed countries have benefited from this because the tariffs on food exports have been reduced. They are also able to travel to other member countries to work and study. In return for this, these countries agreed to reduce tariffs on imports to Britain. However, as world trade grew, many nations added products to their economies and began trading with other countries outside the Commonwealth. In 1973, Britain joined the European Union and adopted its tariffs, which changed the established trading patterns among the Commonwealth nations.

The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation plays an important role in helping developing countries. The Colombo Plan (of which Canada is a part) provides funds for the economic development of Southern Asia and parts of the Pacific. The larger nations also help the smaller nations become part of the worldwide economy through trade arrangements and organized private investment funds.

The prime ministers or presidents of these countries meet every two years to discuss common problems. As well, ministers responsible for health, education, finance, science, law, women's issues, youth affairs, and various fields meet frequently to consult and act on important issues.

