

The Commonwealth as News Maker

The Commonwealth was rarely out of the public eye in the two years since mid-1997. CMAG's deliberations over Nigeria, and that country's eventual return to membership, the high-level mission to persuade international organisations of the concerns of small states in the new global trading system, the Secretary-General's personal efforts to ease tensions in places as diverse as Solomon Islands and Zanzibar – these were just some of the events that put the Commonwealth at the forefront of international affairs.

Secretariat efforts to more effectively publicise its activities and the value of Commonwealth principles were helped by the implementation of several of the recommendations arising from a review of information activities which was presented to Heads of Government at CHOGM 1997. The review called for sharpened strategies using new methods and technologies. It called for greater efforts at image projection not only on the part of the Secretariat itself but also from Commonwealth governments and NGOs.

Public interest in the Commonwealth has increased. Enquiries by mail, electronic mail or telephone have multiplied, much of it from schools. Copies of video films of the Commonwealth and activities of the CFTC have been requested, and in 1999, 200,000 copies of the traditional Commonwealth Day poster were printed as a result of public demand – an increase of 70,000.



Commonwealth Day is celebrated in many countries ... in the UK, Her Majesty The Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, meets a dance troupe who performed for the occasion

Media Relations

Journalists in all Commonwealth countries continued to receive regular information on Commonwealth activities. A series of specialist media briefings, on such initiatives as debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries, small states, capital market volatility, corruption in economic management and co-operation with the World Bank, was organised in London. More than 170 news releases were issued and particular attention paid to the publicity needs of CMAG deliberations.

Contacts with major international and regional media organisations were expanded via new databases, electronic mail, telephone, fax and the Internet.

The Secretariat's flagship magazine, *Commonwealth Currents*, attracted more than 2,000 new readers during the period under review, putting its mailing list at over 31,000. Since early 1998, the magazine has also attracted some paid advertising and in 1999 its contents were available on the

Secretariat's site on the World Wide Web (www.thecommonwealth.org). Leaflets and booklets in the *Commonwealth in Action* series were also produced.

The Commonwealth Features Service, which has been contracted out to a private news agency since 1997, provided some 70 feature stories on developmental

CFTC and the CYP are being used at Commonwealth workshops and training programmes.

Information and Public Affairs

The Secretariat's web site was redesigned in 1998, turning it into a colourful and easily accessible site covering historic and current



These TV journalists were trained in Mozambique with support from the Commonwealth Media Development Fund

issues in different parts of the Commonwealth. The introduction of special accompanying graphics made them more appealing to the print media.

Broadcasting

A series of radio programmes marked the 50th anniversary of the modern Commonwealth in 1999. The series included interviews with several former Heads of Government and material from the Secretariat archives and other libraries. Three series of programmes on the work of the CFTC in the Caribbean, the Commonwealth Writers Prize and Commonwealth women were produced. Other radio programmes focused on the environment and debt issues.

Promotional films on the Commonwealth, the work of the

information such as news releases, feature articles, and information on election observer missions and other current events. The web site has become a major means of disseminating information. It averages over 200,000 'hits' per quarter, and there is much feedback from the site via the electronic mail link.

An associated web site for young people (www.youngcommonwealth.org) was relaunched for Commonwealth Day 1998 and further reshaped for Commonwealth Day 1999. It is proving one of the most successful activities in attracting young people and includes quizzes, certificates, postcards and basic information on the Commonwealth and its member countries.

A web site on the 1997 Commonwealth Heads of

Government Meeting (www.chogm97.org) was jointly set up with the UK Government. Launched on 1 October 1997, it provided key information before, during and after the meeting. The site registered more than 350,000 'hits' during its first quarter and although it was archived in 1999, it still regularly received visitors.

Commonwealth Day

Commonwealth Day, the second Monday in March, has become an important event for bringing young people together in celebrations all over the Commonwealth. Suggestions to teachers on how to celebrate the day are now accessible from the Young Commonwealth web site.

In 1998, the year when the Commonwealth Games were hosted in Malaysia, the theme was 'Sport'. In 1999, the theme was 'Music'. As is traditional, Her Majesty The Queen, as Head of the Commonwealth, and the Secretary-General, issued statements which were read out in many member countries. In 1999, a filmed interview with the Secretary-General and a film on the CYP's Youth Credit Initiative were also sent to more than 45 television stations. An enhanced CD titled *Flavours of Sound* was also produced, featuring music, film and video clips.

The Library

The Library became an additional tool for the information process from 1 July 1997 when it came under the information programme of activities. It continued to provide an invaluable information service for Secretariat staff, consultants, academics and members of the public. Commonwealth Shared Records continued to be released annually to the public under the 30-year rule. Three such releases of documents have now

taken place and details of the papers appear on the Secretariat's web site.

Skills for the Media

For the first time in its 20-year history, the Commonwealth Media Development Fund (CMDf) took on a pan-Commonwealth look. Traditional contributors have been the UK (£200,000 in 1998/99) and Australian (£17,800) Governments. Following an appeal by the Secretary-General at the 1997 CHOGM, The Gambia (£590), India (US\$30,000), Mauritius (£3,000) and New Zealand (£6,100) also contributed to the fund.

In the period under review, the CMDf supported training for more than 1,300 journalists and media workers. This training is carried out through the CMDf's training partners, including NGOs such as the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, Commonwealth Journalists Association and the

Commonwealth Press Union, who organise courses which focus on writing, presentation and technical skills, and on specialist subjects. A list of these courses is at *Appendix II*.

Publications

A Secretariat-wide policy for sale publications was brought into force on 1 July 1998. This policy enabled the Publications Unit to offer professional publishing, design and marketing services to some 40 to 45 Secretariat sale publications a year. Between July 1998 and June 1999, revenue from the sale of publications and royalties stood at £91,000, a 23 per cent increase over the previous year.

Through the Publications Unit, the Secretariat continues to publish the authoritative reference book, *The Commonwealth Year Book*, now in its 30th year. Abstracts of many publications are available on the Secretariat's web site.



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