

The Commonwealth at the Turn of the Century

IN 1949, when that visionary statesman Pandit Nehru proposed the replacement of the British Commonwealth with a Commonwealth of independent sovereign states...

wealth has throughout played a leading role in supporting and facilitating the process of decolonisation. Its signal contribution to the birth of Zimbabwe and to the end of apartheid in South Africa must be viewed among its major achievements.

The path breaking Edinburgh Summit, clearly recognised that one of the major challenges facing the international community at the turn of the century will be the efficient and equitable management of globalisation. Since ODA has been very much on the decline, the progressive integration of markets has now made it essential for all countries to be able to compete in the global market.

A case in point is Bangladesh. In the last three years we have seen a substantial increase in exports, on average nearly 15% year, and have also been able to attract a sizeable quantity of FDI, particularly in the energy sector.

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There have been 30 Commonwealth Summit meetings, during the past fifty years. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, or CHOGM meetings as they are popularly known, constitute the lifeblood of the Commonwealth.

Twenty years later at Harare the Commonwealth Heads pledged themselves to promote the fundamental political values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and honest government, sustainable economic development and international consensus building.

The Lusaka Summit in 1979 paved the way for an independent Zimbabwe and an end to white minority rule. It also adopted the Lusaka Declaration on Racism and Racial Prejudice.

The Nassau Summit in 1985 adopted an accord on Southern Africa as well as the Nassau Declaration on World Order. The Kuala Lumpur Summit in 1989 adopted a statement on Southern Africa: 'The Way Ahead and the Langkawi Declaration on Environment. The Common-

The Commonwealth must make a conscious effort to encourage countries in Africa and Asia, as well as the Small States of the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean to be actively involved in the work of the Commonwealth. If the Commonwealth is perceived by the membership at large as an organization which is dominated by a handful of countries this will run counter to the essential spirit of the Commonwealth ... writes Farooq Sobhan



Ministers meeting in 1977 and has been part of the CHOGM agenda since 1979 when it was first discussed at Lusaka. The problems arising out of their small size, limited resources, isolation and vulnerability to natural disasters prompted the Commonwealth to adopt a programme in support of the Small States.

The projection of a more positive and dynamic image will be one of the major challenges facing the Commonwealth in the 21st century. We must expand the support base of the Commonwealth. Clearly one of the best ways of doing this is with the help of what is widely known as the unofficial Commonwealth.

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The Commonwealth Foundation was established in 1965 at the same time as the Secretariat. The two have traditionally worked closely together. The Commonwealth Foundation, which has been given the responsibility for dealing with the unofficial Commonwealth, has done excellent work in support of the Small States.

The collective power of people to shape the future is greater now than ever before, and the need to exercise it is more compelling. Mobilizing that power to make life in the twenty-first century more democratic, more secure, and more sustainable is the foremost challenge of this generation.

mentally 20 million pounds per annum only, the CFTC must ensure that every pound is spent wisely. Given the serious resource constraints it is important that every effort is made to explore opportunities for cost-sharing.

The Commonwealth Secretariat should be seen as an important thinktank for the membership as a whole. Brimming with new ideas, bubbling with enthusiasm, it should be an exciting place to work, where we can attract some of the best talent in the Commonwealth.

Every CHOGM and this is certainly true of the last five CHOGMs, have invariably commingling of the world's diversity. What the Commonwealth tries to do is to harmonize difference over a wider range and to a further degree than any other grouping.

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added to the work of the Secretariat and the Secretary General. This clearly indicates the confidence reposed in them by the heads of state; more so when you think that they are being asked to do more with substantially reduced resources, both financial and personnel.

Today there are no limits to the Secretary General's versatility. He has to be active in not simply mobilising resources but in developing new partnerships, both with the private sector, the financial institutions, the UN, multilateral bodies and NGOs in advancing the principles, programmes and objectives of the Commonwealth.

The Secretary General's good offices role has become an essential part of his responsibilities. The delicate task of helping member states resolve internal political problems presupposes an enormous degree of trust and confidence in the Secretary General. Upholding the Harare principles, implementing the Millbrook Plan of Action, working alongside C-Mag, making democracy work and promoting good governance, have to become an integral part of the Secretary General's responsibilities.

The Commonwealth today is a finely woven tapestry with different hues and colours, elaborate and intricate. Each one of us has contributed to this tapestry. As Sir Siddhath Ramphal or Sonny so eloquently put it in a speech to the Commonwealth countries League two years ago, 'the true value of the Commonwealth drives not from likeness or even like-mindedness, but from variety. It derives from the fact that this family facility is a

commingling of the world's diversity. What the Commonwealth tries to do is to harmonize difference over a wider range and to a further degree than any other grouping.

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I would like to mention here some specific proposals which I hope can be taken up by either the official or the unofficial Commonwealth at some future date.

1. A group of eminent persons chosen from within the Commonwealth should be established, perhaps at the Durban Summit. They should be mandated to put forward an agenda for the Commonwealth for the first decade of the 21st Century.

2. A separate Commonwealth expert group on globalisation should be set up. This expert group should be mandated to put forward specific proposals on advising both governments and the private sector on measures they should adopt in promoting trade and becoming more competitive in attracting trade and investment. This group should specifically put forward recommendations on simplifying customs procedures, eliminating bureaucratic hurdles and removing administrative bottlenecks.

3. The Commonwealth should launch a programme, which periodically brings together the various regional economic groupings within the Commonwealth such as CARICOM, OECS, SADC, ECOWAS, EAC, SAARC, ASEAN and the South Pacific Forum.

4. Through CFTC as well as COI (Committee for Information Technology for Development) and other concerned bodies, the Commonwealth should jointly set up a task force to prepare and implement a special programme to promote computer and internet literacy throughout the Commonwealth, especially in educational institutions.

5. A Commonwealth Election Commission may be established. Eminent personalities may be invited to serve on the Commission, which could be chaired by a senior statesman. The Commonwealth has built up an excellent track record in observing elections.

6. The success stories within the Commonwealth need to be better advertised and known within the Commonwealth. While the CFTC is doing this to the best of its ability, some thought can be given to promoting closer interaction among NGOs in sister disciplines. Best practices and success stories need to be written up and circulated as widely as possible.

7. While the Commonwealth does have a programme under which volunteers with special skills and expertise in different fields are sent to Commonwealth countries I would like to suggest something slightly different. One of the most remarkable developments in recent years has been the number of outstanding young people from different parts of the Commonwealth in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean who now work in the financial sector in Europe and the US.

8. In February 1997 a Round Table of Heads of Government from African Commonwealth countries was held on Democracy and Good Governance in Botswana. Further such round table meetings should be convened in the future, on a regional basis on the same topic. The summit meetings can be complemented with smaller round table meetings on human rights, gender issues, transparency and accountability in addition to democracy and good governance.

9. In pursuance of the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development the Commonwealth should launch a major publicity drive in member states which would aim to persuade governments (as well as enlist the support of appropriate national bodies in each member state) to implement this purpose. These could be eminent women who would enjoy wide recognition on a regional or sub-regional basis. They could form the world of performing arts, politics, and writers. The implementation of the Plan of Action can also be discussed within the framework of the meeting of regional economic grouping within the Commonwealth.

10. Consideration may be given to the establishment of a Commonwealth think tank which would work closely with Commonwealth Secretariat. Each of these proposals is designed to give a sharper focus to areas of priority interest to the Commonwealth. Hopefully, these proposals can be implemented at a minimum cost. Each proposal will help in enhancing the image of the Commonwealth.

able to us because no one at home is able to pay them on a similar scale.

My suggestion is that through a joint CFTC-CBC programme we arrange to place the services of some of these financial whiz kids with the private sector in their home countries or with public sector financial institutions. These could be short two to three week assignments, with services provided free of cost. The responsibility of the CFTC-CBC will be finding suitable people and arranging for their placement. My sense is that there will be a great demand for the services of such people and these young professionals themselves will be very keen to be of some service to their own countries.

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The opening paragraph of the Report on the Commission on Global Governance reads as follows: 'The collective power of people to shape the future is greater now than ever before, and the need to exercise it is more compelling. Mobilizing that power to make life in the twenty-first century more democratic, more secure, and more sustainable is the foremost challenge of this generation. The world needs a new vision that can galvanize people everywhere to achieve higher levels of co-operation in areas of common concern and shared destiny.'

I believe this new vision can be provided by the Commonwealth in the 21st century. The Commonwealth can and must play a dynamic role in creating a just society free from hunger and disease; a just society which is inclusive and which actively encourages and promotes the participation of all its members in the decision-making process. It must bridge the gap between rich and poor, between the developed and the developing world; it must do so with compassion, with determination and a sense of urgency. It must continue to strive to heal the wounds within our countries and within the international community.

The Commonwealth family must join hands to transform our aspirations and hopes into reality.

The author is former Foreign Secretary and presently Bangladesh's candidate for the Secretary-Generalship of the Commonwealth.

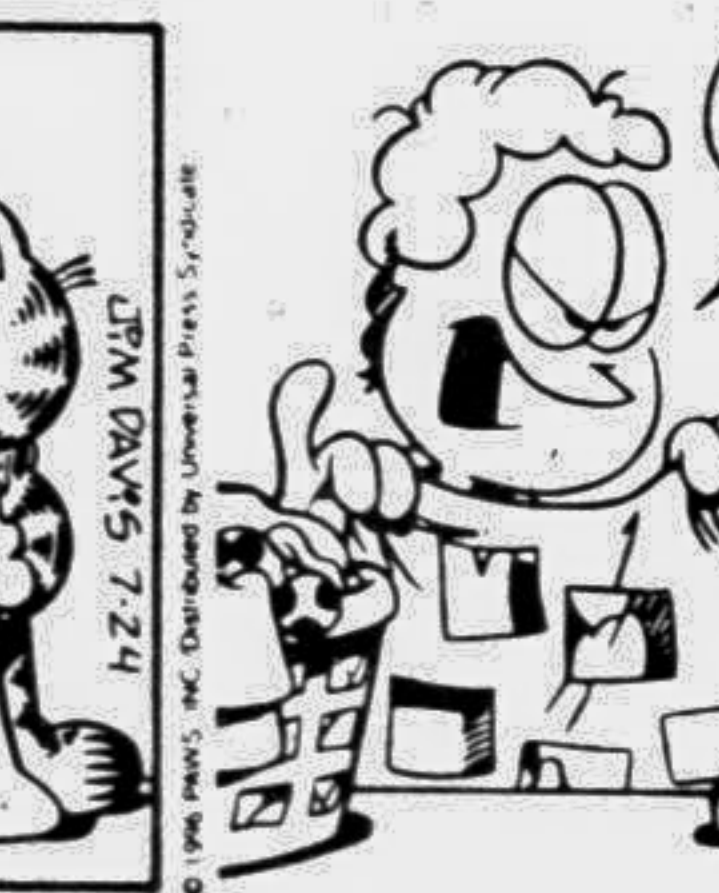
Garfield



James Bond



by Jim Davis



by Anjana Motihar Chandra

THE markets are full of shoppers, roads are choked with traffic and fairs offering exciting rides for children and selling everything under the sun dot the city. Diwali, the annual festival of lights, is being celebrated with usual vigour though official festivities this year have been toned down, with the government cancelling its celebrations to curb expenditure at a time of a national calamity like the October 29 devastating supercyclone in the eastern Indian state of Orissa.

Anti-child Labour Delegation Meets Vajpayee

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has assured a prominent Indian anti-child labour organisation that he will consider its demand for introducing free and compulsory primary education in the country, talking to a delegation of the SACS.

Diwali - the Festival of Lights, but Minus the Firecracker Menace

Pioneer newspaper. Ajit Prasad, a fireworks owner, in the Chandni Chowk commercial area of old Delhi, says, 'The trend has changed. Firecrackers are not as many more. Everyone thinks it is a waste.' The non-governmental organisation Pravah (Wave), which has organised street plays and held programmes in city schools promoting a cracker-free, pollution-free Delhi, for the government's department of environment, is satisfied with the outcome of its efforts.

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child labourer rescued from the custody of administration officials, garlanded Vajpayee on the occasion. Diwali greetings were also exchanged. The meeting is significant considering that this year an anti-firecracker campaign has gained momentum in Delhi in the run up to Diwali, the festival of lights.

Diwali - the Festival of Lights, but Minus the Firecracker Menace

shops and makeshift stalls selling firecrackers report a sharp decline in sales this year, with huge stocks of crackers lying unsold because there are no takers. And even the people who are buying firecrackers, have considerably scaled down their purchases, spending about one-fourth of what they normally would, to honour the Delhi government's drive against crackers. 'Earlier, before Diwali, we used to ask even our relatives to come to our shops only after 11 p.m. But our shops are deserted this year', Gulshan Kumar, a firecracker retailer, told the