



THE COUNCIL OF COMMONWEALTH SOCIETIES

Commonwealth Day Monday 14 March 2005

A message from Her Majesty The Queen Head of the Commonwealth

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Of the nearly two billion citizens of the Commonwealth, more than half are under the age of twenty-five. That provides our association with a strong foundation for the future. Of course, we all face significant challenges. Some people live in conditions of conflict or insecurity. Others have suffered the impact of natural disasters, such as flooding or hurricanes, which can cause great damage to their communities and countries. Quite how destructive this can become became apparent with the hurricane in the Caribbean last September, and of course the devastating Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami.

Overcoming these global challenges, whether as individuals or nations, depends on human ingenuity and commitment. It involves young people in particular having the chance to develop their talents and their abilities – without being held back by inequality. In my lifetime, I have often seen that when people are encouraged to develop their skills of writing and reasoning, they are well placed to contribute their ideas and energies towards building a better future.

The key to unlocking human potential, and creating opportunity, is education.

Education is sometimes described as the golden thread that binds the Commonwealth. Our shared use of a common, world language – English – has underpinned a long and rich tradition of educational co-operation. With our shared practices and similar systems, an extensive network of scholarships, and many examples of excellence, much has been achieved.

That work continues as the Commonwealth responds to today's new challenges. In our association, where around 75 million children lack access to basic education, one clear objective is the UN Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015. Another is mitigating the effects of HIV and AIDS, two-thirds of whose sufferers around the world are Commonwealth citizens, and which in some member countries each year causes the death of more teachers than can be met by newly qualified replacements. A third objective is to expand distance education, through bodies such as the Commonwealth of Learning – based in Canada – which encourages Commonwealth countries to pool their expertise. Knowledge-based economies are the key to future prosperity, and overcoming technological and other inequalities will be much in the minds of Commonwealth Heads of Government when they meet in Malta in November.

For all of us, knowledge is a life-long journey. Education is a precious gift which should be available to everyone, young and old. Not only does it equip us with the skills and the intellect to overcome the problems we face; it also increases our understanding of – and respect for – other people, whatever our differences may be. Perhaps Nelson Mandela put it best when he said, 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world'.

To everyone throughout the Commonwealth who is working towards this worthy goal, I extend my heartfelt thanks.

Elizabeth R.

14 March 2005