

MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMONWEALTH

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Membership in the Commonwealth of Nations has been heavily discussed behind closed doors, but the conversation seems to stop outside of them. Because of the often-changing criteria and the lack of policing in terms of obeying said criteria, some members can appear to be taking advantage of the leniency of the system in order to reap the benefits of membership without contributing to the purpose of the organization. In order to highlight the issues with the current system of membership, however, we must look back to how it was implemented in the first place.

The criteria for membership in the Commonwealth of Nations have been dynamic over the years, to say the least. The original British Commonwealth was a transliteration of the British Empire which had begun to crumble as its colonies separated, revolted, plead for independence or became republics by other means. Already weakened even before the beginning of the twentieth century by the transformations of certain former colonies into self-governing dominions, the British Empire soon found itself making even more concessions.

Created prior to the departure of India and Pakistan from the British Empire, the first documents identifying a British Commonwealth were to be found in the 1931 Statute of Westminster (well-known to high school students as the Statute to affirm and italicize Canada's independence from Britain. The idea, however, had been captured as early as 1884 when Lord Rosebery (a future British Prime Minister) used the words 'a Commonwealth of Nations' to describe the changing Empire. From the year 1887 onwards, the heads of governments from Britain and its self-governing colonies met more-or-less regularly at what were called the Colonial and later Imperial Conferences. These were precursors to the modern Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, and all but one were held in London (as Britain has always been a prime focus of the Commonwealth in practice if not in writing). Although the original purpose of these conferences was to draw the members of the British Empire closer together in an attempt to prevent its separation and to confirm its identity as an Empire, they quickly became an attempt by the dominions to assert their own rights as independents and to remove any remaining British control over their legis-

lature. At the Imperial Conference in 1926, for example, the members adopted the Balfour Report, making each an independent member of the British Empire, equal to every other one, responsible for each of their own legislation, and united together by their common history, their allegiance to the British Crown, and their membership in the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Only after World War II did the British Empire, losing control of India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, the Federation of Malaya, and all of its remaining African colonies but one, rename itself and its circle to the Commonwealth of Nations.

The membership criteria had originally been rather straight-forward: all members, at the time of the Statue of Westminster, must be dominions. Soon after Ireland's independence and withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1949, this changed. The change was mostly due to the impending departure of India, also in the process of becoming a republic.

The document was called the London Declaration had two main points. The first was that it allowed former colonies which had become republics or monarchies to remain in the Commonwealth as long as they recognized the British monarch as the Head of the Commonwealth. The second, to reflect the fact that Britain was down to only 14 overseas territories and no longer the power that it once was, involved removing changing the name of the organization from the 'British Commonwealth of Nations' to simply the Commonwealth of Nations.

In 1971, the criteria changed again with the Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, at the conclusion of the very first Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Singapore. It identified the Commonwealth of Nations as 'a voluntary association of independent sovereign states, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and cooperating in the common interests of their peoples and in promotion of international understanding and world peace', asserted the diversity of the members, and confirmed that membership in other international organizations was allowable. The Singapore Declaration also set out the political principles of the Commonwealth, including but not exclusive to: world peace, support for the United Nations, freedom of the individual, improvement in education rates and decreased poverty, disease, and economic inequality, as well as free trade and the removal of international coercion.

By 1991, offence had been taken to the last point: 'rejecting coercion as an instrument of policy', as it suggested that there was nothing the Commonwealth could do to enforce its very own policy. In Harare, Zimbabwe, the Harare Commonwealth Declaration was issued, reaffirming each of the commitments made in Singapore except the last, which was then removed, and emphasizing the importance of human rights and human equality. This declaration also led to the creation of the Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme, created specifically to lay out the disciplinary

consequences pressed upon a country that did not follow the guidelines set out. Its action has been sadly lacking.

The latest such change in criteria was the Edinburgh Declaration in 1995, which once again confirmed each of the commitments previously made, but also changed the membership criteria to state that new members must have a direct constitutional link with an existing member or 'a substantial relationship with the Commonwealth or a particular group of its members', allowing for the entry of Mozambique into the Commonwealth. At the time, it was the only member without historical colonial ties to the British Empire, and set precedent for the later inclusion of Rwanda.

At this point, the membership criteria for the Commonwealth are as such:

Members must comply with the Harare Principles

Members must be sovereign states

Members must recognize the monarch of the Commonwealth Realms as the Head of the Commonwealth

Members must accept English as the means of Commonwealth Communication

Members must respect the wishes of the general population vis-à-vis Commonwealth membership.

Furthermore, an applicant must hold free and fair elections for legislative representatives and have well-trained public servants and transparent public accounts. New members must also have a colonial or substantial relationship with the Commonwealth or its members – something which, in exceptional circumstances, is considered on a case-by-case basis. These rules, commitments, and guidelines provide for assurance that the identity of the Commonwealth remains untouched.

However, despite these guidelines, a large percentage of the Commonwealth countries have issues with their democratic systems, with their health systems, with their poverty situations, and with many other aspects of their country's human rights policies. India has the largest concentration of people living below the World Bank poverty line (\$1.25/day), and half of the children in the country are underweight. Jamaica has been called 'the most homophobic place on Earth'; Nigeria has extensive problems including but not limited to drug trafficking and rape, torture, and other inhumane treatments of prisoners. The list goes on.

In 1949, the Commonwealth was in need of a way to maintain its membership. The British Empire was changing, dissipating, reacting to produce nations that were keen on enforcing their independence. The loss of Northern Ireland was nothing of significance, but the loss of a nation like India would have meant the death-knell

of the Commonwealth of Nations, as it would have been followed by all the other nation-states clamoring for sovereignty. The Commonwealth had been forced to change in order to avoid destruction, and it has been changing ever since. But then the question becomes: what for?

Today, it is made up of 54 countries (one of which is suspended) of varying sizes, cultures, and people. Commonwealth Day, held on the second Monday in May, is celebrated to a certain degree in all Commonwealth nations around world with events and speeches, spotlighting international issues like women's role in the world and the environment. It cannot be said that the Commonwealth is so desperate for membership that it becomes necessary to ignore member adherence to regulations – and so why the criteria are looser than ever is a question that remains unanswered.

Of its current members, some (the visible minority) seem to be used only for their checkbooks. While the United Kingdom has its former empire and current sphere of influence to think of, the other wealthy nations like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, seem to gain little from their participation. The youth, culture, and economy of these countries are in no way influenced by its membership, and the organization is rarely discussed in the schools. Unlike the United Nations the Commonwealth does not occupy the world stage and does not include major international players like China, Japan, or the United States of America – and so the resolutions it may make are restricted heavily.

The benefits of membership go to the poorer countries: Ghana, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone, and others in the same position. Initiatives like the Commonwealth of Learning, while based in countries such as Canada, have few works going on there, dedicating their efforts to others. This lack of balance in membership has already begun to alienate nations such as Australia. Its separation from the Commonwealth may be imminent in future years, if only because a new generation of politicians does not care for the lackluster relationship. It is one of the countries which fulfills every requirement of membership, and so is disregarded.

The most disturbing point is located in the fact that a significant portion of the Commonwealth, including some of its most recent members, do not adhere to or even seek the illusion of adhering to the policies and regulations of the organization. A clear example is Mozambique, the official language of which is Portuguese, something that clearly violates the principle that 'an applicant country should accept Commonwealth norms and conventions, such as the use of the English language...' Other commonly spoken languages consist of Swahili, Makhuwa, and Sena; English is not at all widely spoken. The latest political elections the country held are criticized as being flawed and skewed; child malnutrition is reportedly on the rise; in 2007, there were approximately a million children not attending an educational facility; and the country remains to be one of the poorest in the world.

On the other hand, Rwanda, finding itself in the same position as Mozambique in terms of having no ties to the British Commonwealth, has adapted to include the English language and syllabi more predominantly into its educational systems since its inclusion in the Commonwealth. Still, one in five children die before their fifth birthday; there are two doctors and two paramedics per 100,000 people, and about 9.5 per cent of the population is HIV positive.

As a matter of course, the AIDS epidemic plagues many Commonwealth countries, and is being poorly treated in a great number of them. An example Swaziland, which currently has one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world and the lowest life expectancy. The epidemic was not identified as one until 2004, when Swaziland first acknowledged it as a problem. However, according to the Mortality Fact Sheet of 2006, provided by the World Health Organization, 47% of infant deaths under 5 were caused by HIV/AIDS, as opposed to 64% of all deaths. The life expectancy at birth was about 35 years for women and 40 years for men. Although the crisis affects a large number of Commonwealth countries, it is poorly dealt with in most; the number includes Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, and South Africa.

Countries with restricted or biased media access and free speech include Brunei, Cameroon, Gambia, and Kiribati. Furthermore, Malawi, which also restricts free speech and freedom of the press, is plagued with problems in the human rights sector. Police brutality, mob violence, government and official corruption, and even human trafficking comes on top of the fact that in 2006, 40% of residents were living under the poverty line. Although that number has been increasing, others have not been. Nigeria faces similar problems with restrictions on the freedoms of speech, religion, movement, assembly, and the press, and is also highly active in drug and human trafficking and organized crime. Neither of these countries have been penalized for their internal activities or the lack of government involvement in preventing or punishing these activities.

Education is severely lacking in countries such as Uganda and Pakistan, where in 2004 only 46.6 per cent of the population was literate – a number that dwindled to a shocking 3% in tribal areas. Papua New Guinea can also be found on this list. Once again, there has been no reprimand for any of these nations in reference to their lack of activity on these issues.

Other such problems, which tend to conflict directly with the membership principles outlined in the numerous criteria established since the Commonwealth's creation, can be found throughout a large portion of the Commonwealth nations. Detrimental to the growth of the individual nations as well as the Commonwealth

itself, dishonest in reference to the countries which provide funds for the improvement of these statistics, and disrespectful to their own people, these infractions should have been addressed by this point – but have not been.

While the position of the Commonwealth Secretariat is not to question the policies of the Heads of Government, we must consider that one of the key cornerstones of our existence is to promote the values of democracy, human rights, and education, to name but a few. While it is difficult to insist that all members comply with the conditions set out in the Harare Principles, the Secretariat would like to point out that several members have not made the effort to comply with those standards. We have identified this issue as one of our primary concerns given that there have been concerns raised regarding the worth of the Commonwealth as an organization. It is the hope of the Secretariat that the Heads of Government will consider this issue and decide on a course of action during the 2011 CHOGM in Vancouver, Canada on November 18 - 21.

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