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## FACT SHEET

# WHAT IS THE COMMONWEALTH? WHO BELONGS TO THE COMMONWEALTH?

### NAME

Commonwealth of Nations  
(referred to as the Commonwealth)

### ESTABLISHED

1931 - as a result of the former 'dominions' of the British Empire wanting more self-government and autonomy from Great Britain.

### LOCATION HQ

London, United Kingdom (Secretariat)

### AIM

The aim of the Commonwealth is to advance democracy, human rights, sustainable economic, and social development among member countries and beyond.

### ROLE

To provide a platform for 'global consensus building' and practical assistance for 'sustainable development'.

### SECRETARY-GENERAL

The current secretary-general is a New Zealander, the Rt. Hon Don McKinnon

### HISTORY

The Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary international grouping of sovereign and dependent territories. Member states accept the British monarch as the symbolic head of the Commonwealth but retain full control of their own domestic and foreign affairs.

The Commonwealth (formerly known as the British Commonwealth of Nations) evolved from the British Empire. It was formally established in 1931 by the Statute of Westminster, which proclaimed the Commonwealth a free association of self governing states united by allegiance to the crown. Founding members included Great Britain, Irish Free State, Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The Statute of Westminster was followed by the London Declaration of 1949 which saw states accept the British crown as the symbol of their association rather than recognise the crown as head of state.

All countries within the Commonwealth of Nations (except Mozambique) have historical links with the United Kingdom.

The structure and activities of the Commonwealth of Nations are based on a shared history, traditional procedures and language rather than a written charter. Some countries within the Commonwealth experienced large waves of British migration such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa and have strong historical, cultural and family links with Britain. These countries have been heavily influenced by British governmental, judicial and educational systems. Other countries such as India and Kenya were governed by an expatriate British administration who remained separate and isolated from the mainstream indigenous population.

The Commonwealth has since grown into a multi-racial and diverse association as countries within the British Empire gained independence. Many of these countries moved from being colonies of Britain to become dominions or fully independent. From the 1950s many former British colonies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific gained independence and either joined or left the Commonwealth<sup>1</sup>.

1. Upon independence in 1949 Ireland left the Commonwealth and Hong Kong left following the return of the British colony to Chinese rule in 1997. South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961 choosing to maintain their apartheid policy and rejoined in 1994 following political reform. Pakistan left in 1972 when Britain recognised the independence of Bangladesh and rejoined in 1989. Fiji was suspended in 1987 due to a military coup and readmitted in 1997. Nigeria was suspended in 1995 for human rights abuses and was readmitted in 1999.

## MEMBERSHIP

Today there are 53 independent nation states and 20 dependencies that belong to the Commonwealth. Members share a range of customs and traditions that result from their association with Britain. 30% of the world's population (1.7 billion people) are members of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is headed by the Secretary-General who is responsible for the administration and organisation of the Commonwealth. The Secretary General is elected by the Commonwealth Heads of Government.

Membership of the Commonwealth does not involve legal or constitutional obligations nor does the Commonwealth act as a 'bloc'. It recognises that international affairs and priorities between members are diverse and at times conflicting. Members are free to join other international or regional organisations such as the Organisation for African Unity.

Membership of the Commonwealth can be achieved by conforming to the:

Harare Declaration of 1991 which advocates:

- the promotion of democracy and good government
- Human Rights
- Rule of Law
- Sustainable economic and social development

Members are also required to contribute to the running budget, with contributions based on population and income of each country.

Members are united by their common historical links. Many have 'Westminster' style parliaments and common judicial and educational systems. The official language of the Commonwealth of Nations is English.

Today the Commonwealth is made up of 16 countries who recognise the British Crown as head of state (including Australia, Canada and New Zealand) and the remainder are republics or monarchies.

The Commonwealth is committed to the principles of democracy and human rights, and attempts to persuade members to adopt policies by conscience rather than through force. The fact that members are not legally bound to follow Commonwealth policy means that states can, and often have, followed policies that go against the Commonwealth.

For example, during the apartheid era in South Africa, some member states continued to conduct political, economic, and cultural relations with South Africa. In New Zealand sporting contacts with South Africa continued, and in 1976 resulted in many black African states boycotting the Montreal Olympics and further criticism resulted from hosting the South African rugby team in 1981 contravening the Gleneagles Agreement.<sup>2</sup>

In December 2003, Zimbabwe pulled out of the Commonwealth as part of President Mugabe's rule, which often contradicted the aims of the Commonwealth.

## INDEPENDENT STATES

### Africa

Botswana, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

### Indian Ocean

Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles

### Asia

Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Sri Lanka

### Caribbean/Central America

Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts & Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent & the Grenadines, Trinidad & Tobago

### Pacific

Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru\*, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu\*<sup>3</sup>, Vanuatu, Western Samoa

### Europe

United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Isle of Man, Channel Islands), Cyprus, Malta

### North America

Canada

### UK Dependent Territories

Anguilla, Bermuda, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, British Virgin Is, Cayman Is, Falkland Is & Dependencies, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn Is, St Helena & Dependencies, Turks & Caicos Is

### NZ Associated/Dependent Territories

Niue, Cook Is, Tokelau

2. 1977 Gleneagles Agreement: Commonwealth Agreement whereby members agreed to discourage contact & competition between their sportspeople and organisations with those of South Africa to express opposition against apartheid.<sup>3</sup>
3. Nauru and Tuvalu have special membership
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### **COMMONWEALTH PROGRAMMES**

The Commonwealth promotes development, co-operation and cultural exchange between member states by a series of foundations, grants and organised events.

#### **Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)**

This provides the main forum for consultation among member states. The heads of government meet biannually to discuss a range of issues such as health, education, finance, law, youth affairs etc. Initially economic issues dominated the Commonwealth due to the importance of trade that existed between the empire-linked countries. Tariffs between countries were often reduced, particularly foodstuffs, but as Britain started to increase trade with Europe and then entered the European Community in 1973 trade between Britain and the Commonwealth declined.

#### **Commonwealth Games**

The Games were established in 1930. The games are held every four years and hosted by a member country.

#### **Commonwealth Foundation**

Provides financial support and assistance to professional associations and nongovernmental organisations

#### **Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC)**

Promotes economic and social development to alleviate poverty in member countries.

#### **Commonwealth Service Abroad Programme (CSAP)**

A volunteer programme whereby the Commonwealth assists in development related projects.

#### **Commonwealth Foundation**

Fosters a range of programmes and activities among member nations to improve the understanding of cultures that exist within the Commonwealth.

#### **Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group**

Established in 1995, this includes a group of eight ministers who assess the extent of violations and recommend measures for collective action. Action can include sanctions or suspension eg. In 1995 Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth because of violations committed by its military government.

#### **Commonwealth Day**

Second Monday in March

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COLONY	territory that is occupied by a settlement from a ruling state
DOMINION	self-governing state within British Empire
DEPENDENT TERRITORY (DEPENDENCY)	a territory of a state that does not share a common border
WESTMINSTER GOVERNMENT	British parliamentary system of government where the country is ruled by the majority political party. The executive comes from within the party and includes the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Government and Opposition MPs sit in parliament.
APARTHEID	the policy of racial segregation as practised in South Africa between 1948-1992.
STATUTE OF WESTMINSTER	Legislation passed by the British Government in 1931 to give Dominion status to the members of the Commonwealth including New Zealand
BLOC	group of people or countries united by common interest
REPUBLIC	a form of government where the people and their elected representatives hold supreme power.
MONARCHY	a form of government where power is held by a single and usually hereditary figure such as a king or queen. The powers of a monarchy can vary from absolute to just ceremonial.

**RELEVANT LINKS**[www.thecommonwealth.org](http://www.thecommonwealth.org)