

NOTES FROM TONY EGGLETON: June 2014

The following document contains the memories of Tony Eggleton of his engagements with the Commonwealth in the course of his career.

Australian Prime Ministers and the Commonwealth of Nations

I worked with Robert Menzies for only a few months before his retirement in January 1966.

However, while he was very attached to the UK and British traditions, I was left with the strong impression that he was less than enthusiastic about the emergence of “the new Commonwealth”. He was more comfortable with the smaller Commonwealth family. He also doubted the value and merit of a Commonwealth Secretary-General and the Secretariat.

Harold Holt was Prime Minister for less than two years (his tragic drowning in December 1967). We attended a Prime Ministers’ Conference at Marlborough House. He was pleased to participate and established good relations with the other Commonwealth Leaders.

He got on well with Trudeau who, at that stage, seemed rather half hearted about the Commonwealth (and made more headlines with his antics). Holt was keen on international relations, and especially Australia’s links in Asia and the Pacific. I suspect he would have gone on to be a Commonwealth stalwart, but for his untimely death.

John Gorton was a Commonwealth sceptic. As his senior Press Secretary and adviser, I had to persuade him to attend the Singapore CHOGM. He was reluctant to attend, and thought it would be a waste of time. The experience did not result in a change of mind. He was disappointed when, a short time later, I accepted the post as Director of Commonwealth Information in London (1971).

Gough Whitlam appeared to recognise the value of the Commonwealth. I watched him in action at the Ottawa CHOGM and he seemed to make the most of creating contacts with the other leaders. His term as PM was relatively short, being brought down by the “dismissal” in 1975.

Malcolm Fraser, to date, has been far the most committed Australian Prime Minister in support of the “modern Commonwealth” (aspects of Malcolm’s role will be reflected in later notes).

Bob Hawke saw the merits of the Commonwealth, and contributed accordingly. Despite being Party political opponents, he wanted to see Malcolm Fraser as Secretary-General. He thought Malcolm would provide strong and effective leadership of the Commonwealth of Nations.

Andrew Peacock, with his background as Foreign Minister, appreciated the virtues of the Commonwealth. While Opposition Leader he was largely preoccupied by domestic politics but, if he had made Prime Minister, he would have wanted to make a positive contribution to the Commonwealth.

John Howard was largely in tune with the modern Commonwealth. I recommended that we should hold a CHOGM in Australia to mark our Centenary of Federation and he was happy to act on this suggestion (Hugh Craft managed this CHOGM in Queensland). John was very much in favour of the Queen's role in the Commonwealth context.

Tony Abbott Early days yet for Tony. I have talked with him about the continuing value of the Commonwealth, and I believe he will see the advantage of making a constructive contribution in Commonwealth affairs. He is especially focused on Commonwealth countries in our part of the world.

MARLBOROUGH HOUSE AND ARNOLD SMITH

I was privileged to work with Arnold. He was dedicated to his Commonwealth role, and was determined that the purpose and standing of the Secretary-General and the Secretariat should be properly acknowledged. He was appreciative of the contributions made by his staff, and never lacking in ideas for expanding the influence of the Commonwealth of Nations.

While the Brits had some early reservations about Arnold, they came to respect him. Some national leaders thought he had an exaggerated view of his own importance, but most accepted that he meant well.

I travelled extensively with Arnold and he thoroughly enjoyed his direct contact with Commonwealth peoples at all levels. He wanted me to extend my term at the Secretariat, and to play a closer direct role with the Secretary-General. However, I was at a career crossroads, and decided it was best if I returned to Australia.

Arnold taught me some useful lessons: i.e. don't call a meeting unless you can be fairly certain of its outcome; write the draft minutes before the meeting and try to ensure the final communiqué is a fair reflection of the draft! I found these tactics of value in my later political career!!

Director of Commonwealth Information

Arnold gave me a free hand in this role.

We started producing some modest publications, but I put a lot of emphasis on establishing contacts with relevant media correspondents in London. I also sought out correspondents from other Commonwealth countries when they were visiting Britain. Also quickly built bridges to all Commonwealth associations and institutions.

I was greatly assisted by Patsy Robertson, who was already on the staff at Marlborough House, and became part of my team. Of immense help to me was Derek Ingram. He gave much encouragement and guided me towards appropriate contacts. His Gemini News Service was a major asset in spreading the Commonwealth message, and we worked closely together in identifying newsworthy and credible Commonwealth stories.

I attended conferences in various parts of the Commonwealth, making arrangements for the media and handling press briefings.

CFTC

I will just quote from my own record about this issue:

“Soon after starting at Marlborough House there was a Commonwealth Finance Ministers’ Conference in London. Australia was represented by the Australian Treasurer, Bill Snedden. The Secretary-General was looking for increased input to a special fund for technical assistance.

“The Australian officials, reflecting Australian Government policy at the time, were advising Snedden against this expenditure. However, in a private meeting, I was able to persuade Bill to announce an Australian contribution to the fund (much to the irritation of the officials). This gave me a flying start in my relations with Arnold Smith.”

Trudeau

Pierre’s senior staff convinced him that he should play a more constructive role in the Commonwealth. I worked closely with Pierre Trudeau in Canada’s hosting of the Heads of Government Meeting in Ottawa in 1973. By this time he gave every impression of being strongly committed to the Commonwealth. He was particularly anxious to make the meetings more focused and relevant. Ottawa was the first meeting to implement the CHOGM decision calling on the Leaders to participate in genuine debate instead of making formalized speeches crafted for their domestic audiences.

Pierre talked to me about tactics successfully to achieve this more meaningful outcome. He decided that, if it was evident that a Leader was simply reading a speech prepared in advance in his home city, then as Chairman he would start asking questions and seeking clarifications. This meant that a Leader had no option but to abandon his prepared text. Pierre and most Leaders welcomed this opportunity for genuine debate and frankness. Pierre Trudeau felt that CHOGM meetings were much more effective as a result; and there is no doubt it was a significant milestone in the evolution of Heads of Government Meetings.

The establishment of the “retreat” for closer personal contact between the Leaders further enhanced the scope for unscripted, down to earth discussion. In this respect, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings were becoming more realistic and fruitful than hidebound, inflexible international organisations.

MALCOLM FRASER

Malcolm had always taken a keen interest in the developing world. He had deep concerns about the disadvantaged, poverty and human rights. When he became Opposition Leader I had little doubt that he would wish the Liberal Party’s foreign policy to reflect his priorities. He had appointed me as Secretary to the Shadow Cabinet. During foreign affairs discussions in Shadow Cabinet, Malcolm invited me to speak about the continuing and increasing value of modern Commonwealth of Nations. Thus the Commonwealth was included in the Party’s foreign policy.

I had little doubt that Malcolm, as Prime Minister, could make a substantial contribution to the Commonwealth. Because of his commitment to improving the

circumstances of the less fortunate in “The Third World”, Malcolm and I mutually recognised that the Commonwealth would be a valuable channel of focus and influence. In addition to my role as Federal Director of the Liberal Party, the PM invited me to serve as a Special Adviser on Commonwealth issues (this was the basis on which I accompanied him to Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings).

I used my Commonwealth contacts to prepare the ground for Australian initiatives and for Malcolm’s distinctive involvement. For his first Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London in 1977 he sent me ahead to hold preliminary talks with Commonwealth representatives and the media. The Commonwealth Secretariat and key Commonwealth institutions and figures in London welcomed the potential Australian momentum. Malcolm did not take long to make an impact and to win the support and respect of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, and not least those from the developing world. Michael Manley was among those who was pleasantly surprised at Malcolm’s constructive views about Commonwealth members big and small. Malcolm Fraser took a prominent role in responding to contemporary Commonwealth problems, including apartheid in South Africa and the resolution of the Rhodesian impasse. His liberal and progressive positions on these issues did not please all members of his Government but, despite the reservations, he refused to be diverted from his stance. Some in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs have not always been particularly Commonwealth minded, but there were plenty of Departmental staff (senior and junior) who gave dedicated and loyal support to the Prime Minister.

CHOGRM

Malcolm worked to make the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings increasingly effective. He recognised that the smaller Commonwealth countries were often eclipsed by the bigger players at these meetings. This led to his initiative for Heads of Government regional meetings, at which smaller countries could have a louder voice. A range of public servants in the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister’s Department provided strong backing for the CHOGRM plans; however, it would appear that Sonny Ramphal was less than enthusiastic! Sonny was probably worried that the regional meetings might, in some way, have an impact on the status of the full Heads of Government meetings. (It was distressing that the first CHOGRM, at the Hilton Hotel in Sydney, was the target of a bomb attack).

Margaret Thatcher

Margaret asked for my services for the 1979 elections and I became a member of the Conservative Party campaign team. Malcolm was worried about Margaret’s likely attitudes to South African issues, and the Rhodesian situation. The day after Margaret’s election victory, Malcolm telephoned me in London. He asked me to speak to Peter Carrington about sending a couple of senior Australian officials to London urgently to present Australian thinking about these matters. Within a couple of hours, Peter Carrington was back in touch to say the officials would be welcome. At the same time, Malcolm was anxious to meet with Margaret Thatcher. She was also keen to have direct talks with him. Hence Margaret made the 1979 visit to Canberra, shortly after her election victory.

In your questionnaire, you asked about “That press briefing at the barbeque”

Herewith my record of this controversial episode:-

“Malcolm had been in the forefront of finding a resolution to the Rhodesian issue. Negotiations were sensitive but, finally, despite an occasionally awkward and unpredictable Margaret Thatcher, the Commonwealth meeting agreed on a positive way forward (The Commonwealth Zimbabwe/Rhodesian Peace Plan).”

“We had a big Australian press party with us in Lusaka, and were conscious of time zones and their deadlines. Ahead of the official announcement, the timing of which would have left the Australian correspondents high and dry, Malcolm and I decided to brief the Australian media.”

“A couple of British pressmen infiltrated the Australian briefing and immediately sought confirmation of the Peace Plan with Margaret Thatcher’s Press Secretary.”

“Margaret assumed we had deliberately sought to “lock her in” to the Commonwealth plan, before she had consulted with sceptics and critics in London.”

“That same evening the Australian High Commissioner was giving a reception for the visiting Prime Ministers. There was a rumour that Margaret would fail to appear. However, she did attend with Denis Thatcher, although they both did little to hide their anger.

The Heads of Government at the reception adjourned informally to an adjoining room to officially endorse the communiqué, already released by the Australians.”

“To add insult to Mrs. Thatcher’s injury, most Commonwealth leaders were elated by the turn of events. They feared that Margaret Thatcher might change her mind at the last minute about the Rhodesian consensus, and they welcome Malcolm’s unintentional “master stroke”!”

Media Briefings and Melbourne CHOGM

Arnold Smith had authorised me to undertake media briefings, such as at the CHOGM in Ottawa. We saw this as part of the responsibilities of the Director of Commonwealth Information. Arnold and Heads of Government were pleased with the outcome. Subsequently, with changes at the Secretariat, I believe there may have been some unease about the nature and presentation of CHOGM briefings. In respect of the Melbourne CHOGM in 1981, it was Malcolm Fraser’s wish that I should play a role in the conference. I was appointed as Chair of the Media and Public Affairs Committee and as Briefing Coordinator. I had access to all sessions and handled the twice-daily media briefings. As I understood it, the incumbent Director of Commonwealth Information had many skills and qualities, but that media briefings were not his cup of tea. I am not sure about a “crisis with the media contingent”; but correspondents facing deadlines, not least Australians, can be quick to criticise.

Sonny Ramphal

Sonny and Malcolm Fraser had a good relationship. I got the impression that they respected each other, and enjoyed a comfortable rapport. They were both strong personalities and there were occasional disagreements but, all in all, they worked well together. Malcolm arranged for Sonny to receive an Order of Australia.

Malcolm and the Secretary-Generalship

I suspect that Bob Hawke may have over played his hand in trying to get Malcolm appointed as Secretary-General. He probably pressed a bit too hard. It was an uphill contest when there was already a broad consensus that the next SG should be from

Africa. Emeka was, in many ways, a logical choice. He was really in the box seat. Anyaoka had excellent credentials and, as far as I observed, did a very solid and professional job as Secretary-General. I suspect that Malcolm Fraser would have given a lot of clout to the role and would have been a strong and highly effective Secretary-General. But diplomacy was not always his strong point!

The Queen

The Queen's position has been an immense asset for the modern Commonwealth of Nations. She has been a respected and highly regarded figure in harnessing a diverse Commonwealth. I suspect a "Royal" presence will continue to be a cohesive element, whatever the future may hold.

The Importance of the Government Heads

The relatively unique structure whereby Heads of Government are able and willing to meet formally and informally together, often without officials, and engaging in frank exchanges, remains a distinctive and central part of the Commonwealth of Nations. The CHOGM gives standing and status to the Commonwealth and, with relevant policies and objectives, should be the driving force of the organisation. When Heads of Government fail to attend it raises doubts about commitment to the Commonwealth family. Lesser political personalities or government officials are no real substitute for the Heads of Government themselves. The much enlarged Commonwealth inevitably means that some leaders may be apologies, but every endeavour should be made to ensure that CHOGM is truly a meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government. It is also unfortunate that the meetings are increasingly truncated, but that is the price of the time pressures on today's Leaders. Public interest in the Commonwealth is most frequently stimulated by the CHOGM meetings. The networks of civil society and professional organisations are of immense value and, day in and day out, demonstrate the virtue of the Commonwealth relationships. These networks are, and will continue to be, a firm and valuable foundation but it is the Heads of Government meetings that, for the media and the public, give the Commonwealth its profile and greatest relevance (not forgetting the Commonwealth Games, of course!).