Remarks presented at a Welcome Reception for the new President and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, BC Canada

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By
Sir John Daniel
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Thank you, Dr Perinbam, for those kind and generous remarks and thank you all for coming in such numbers to bid me welcome to the Commonwealth of Learning, to Vancouver and to Canada.

Last evening, when speaking after his farewell dinner, my distinguished predecessor, Professor Raj Dhanarajan, made five points. I too will confine my remarks to five points, although since Raj was leaving the Commonwealth of Learning whereas I am joining it, they will be different points.

First, I express my warm thanks to the Board of Governors of COL, and most particularly to its chairman, Dr Lewis Perinbam, for the confidence they have shown in appointing me as President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning. I know, from having experienced it, that the Board conducted a rigorous and thorough selection process and I am delighted that their choice fell on me. I shall do everything in my power to be worthy of their trust.

The task of leading COL brings together in a remarkable way the different strands of my career. The focus of COL’s work is to harness the power of open and distance learning to development. I have spent much of my career doing just that, notably at the Télé-université and at Athabasca University here in Canada and at the Open University in the UK.

The status of COL is that of an international, intergovernmental organisation. I come to you from several very stimulating years as Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, another international, intergovernmental body working in education. May I say what a pleasure it is to find that the President of
the General Conference of UNESCO, His Excellency Ambassador Michael Omolewa of Nigeria, is also a member of COL's Board of Governors. I first met Michael here in Vancouver in 1982 at a memorable conference on distance education held at UBC.

The tools of COL's work are the rapidly developing array of educational and communications technologies. These too have been a theme of my career ever since I enrolled for a Master's degree in Educational Technology at what was then Sir George Williams University in 1970.

Second, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Professor Raj Dhanarajan. It is always a pleasure to take over the leadership of an institution from someone who has led it successfully, and Raj led it very successfully. I know that he will be a tough act to follow because I have followed his career for many years, both at the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong and here at COL. He is at this very moment flying to Hong Kong and I wish him and Sue a happy and active retirement.

Third, may I say what a pleasure it is for Kristin and me to be back in Canada. We were married 38 years ago and headed immediately for several years in France. From there we came to Canada, where we spent 21 happy years in Quebec, Alberta and Ontario. After that life took us to the UK for 11 years and then to France for three years. So here we are back in Canada, going round the loop again so to speak. It is a special pleasure to be here in British Columbia, which seems to be attracting members of our family like a magnet.

One of our daughters moved here from Sudbury with her husband two years ago. At the end of this month our other daughter, plus her husband and our three grandchildren, are moving to Vancouver Island from the Isle of Skye in Scotland. So in the space of two years we shall have added nine souls to the population of this Province, a modest contribution to its economic growth.

Kristin and I live not far from City Hall, with its statue of George Vancouver looking out over the city, the sea and the mountains. This wonderful city on the Pacific Rim seems to me the ideal location for an organisation devoted to open and distance learning. George Vancouver nicely symbolises the conquest of distance and we find in this city a palpable openness to ideas and to new ways of doing things.

Fourth, while there are a few other international, intergovernmental bodies located in Canada, I am very proud to lead what is, I believe, the only such body actually to have been created here. That was in 1987, when the Commonwealth Heads of Government met here in Vancouver. What an extraordinarily evocative and appropriate name they chose for the new organisation that they decided to create: The Commonwealth of Learning. Learning is indeed our common wealth. That fundamental principle is even clearer, as we move into a 21st century in which knowledge will be the key to prosperity, than it was back in 1987.

Among the Commonwealth Heads of Government who pushed for the creation of COL at that meeting 17 years ago, India's Rajiv Gandhi and his counterpart from Nigeria were particularly vocal and their two countries pledged to make contributions to COL's budget in hard currency. Thus began the focus on open and distance learning for the purpose of national and community development that is the heart of COL's
work. This is what I mean by the 'common wealth' of learning. Learning confers benefits to individuals, to be sure, but we must always remember that learning is also a collective endeavour. Our name, the Commonwealth of Learning, captures that brilliantly.

Finally, it will be a great privilege to serve the Commonwealth. For the last three years I have been a proud member of the staff of the United Nations system, travelling the world on a red UN laissez passer. That enriching experience of dealing with the whole world makes me eager to serve a smaller subset of that world, the 54 countries of the Commonwealth. Those countries, which account for a significant proportion of the world's population, are hugely varied. The Commonwealth includes rich countries and poor countries. It includes countries that that are continental and sub-continental in size alongside numerous small island states with tiny populations.

But the countries of the Commonwealth are united, in this diversity, by great common bonds, which you can express as the three 'L's': law, language and learning. The countries of the Commonwealth share traditions in law, language and learning that make collaboration between them particularly natural and fruitful. I have been proud to do my bit, in the UN system, to help countries like Afghanistan and Iraq get back on their feet. However, it will be very satisfying to work with the countries of the Commonwealth, which are mostly at peace and getting on with the task of development in a steady and determined manner.

I am highly impressed by the energy and skills of my new colleagues at the Commonwealth of Learning. We are a small organisation but we are very focused and I am sure that, with your support, we shall do much to assist the development of Commonwealth countries. The challenge is to eliminate poverty and to create nations of healthy, educated people.

Fundamentally, development is about freedom. The measure of development is the degree to which we increase the freedoms that people can enjoy. Freedom is also the means of development, for it is the free agency of free people that develops families, communities and nations. Education is the high road to freedom and thus to development. I shall do everything I can to ensure that the Commonwealth of Learning, from its base here in Vancouver, becomes one of the world's most effective agencies for development.