

# *Law, Language and Learning: The Common Wealth of the Commonwealth*

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*Law, Language and Learning: The Common Wealth of the Commonwealth, Gala Reception Museum of Anthropology, UBC, Commonwealth Day - 14 March 2005*

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## **Transcript**

Your Honour the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia;  
Mr Andrew Charles of the Musqueam Nation;  
Distinguished Members of the Consular Corps;  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for the honour of speaking to you at this celebration of Commonwealth Day on the theme of education.

It is my challenge and my privilege to work for the advancement of education in the Commonwealth as President of the Commonwealth of Learning. I begin with a few words about this unique organisation; one of Vancouver's best kept secrets.

First, the Commonwealth of Learning is the only intergovernmental organisation ever created in Canada. The Commonwealth Heads of Government set it up at their 1987 meeting held here in Vancouver. Canada won the subsequent competition to host COL and decided to locate it in Vancouver, so here we are.

Second, our location is unique amongst Commonwealth organisations. The two other intergovernmental agencies, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation, are both located in the UK, as are nearly all the pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organisations. Being located here in Canada gives us a different perspective on the Commonwealth, which is healthy.

Third, COL is the only international, intergovernmental organisation of any kind that focuses exclusively on helping countries to use technology to increase the scope and scale of education and training.

Technology has already revolutionised many areas of life and our job is extend that revolution to learning.

In 2000 the United Nations convened the largest meeting of heads of government ever held. They expressed their ambitions for the new century in a Millennium Declaration that articulated a series of ambitious goals for human development. The goals aim to reduce poverty and hunger and call for the improvement of education, health and the environment. To reach these targets requires action on many fronts, but the common need is for everyone to learn new ways of living.

To reduce poverty and hunger, millions of farmers and smallholders in the developing world need knowledge to help them to farm more productively, to grow new crops, and to market their produce better.

To provide a basic education to the 100 million children who never see the inside of a school, and the 100 million more who do not stay in school long enough to learn anything useful, we need many more teachers. Most of the 20 million teachers already at work across the Commonwealth need further training.

Achieving the health goals requires better medical services, particularly the training of more birth assistants to reduce maternal mortality. But a huge improvement of the world's health could be achieved simply with better hygiene. If everyone on earth learned to wash their hands five times a day, the health of the world would be transformed. The role of the Commonwealth of Learning is to help countries use technology to achieve this massive increase in human learning.

We are privileged to work for the 53 countries of the Commonwealth, which gives us great advantages. All Commonwealth countries are democratic and that is crucial. Recent studies, such as last week's Report of Britain's Africa Commission, are all agreed that democracy, the rule of law and good governance are vital foundations for development.

Our work also benefits from the three 'Ls' that unite the Commonwealth: language, law and learning.

English is a working language for all Commonwealth governments and sometimes for their citizens. Systems of government and legislative processes are recognisably similar. Learning is valued and takes place in schools and universities that readily link across the world through common traditions and a shared language.

You could call these three 'Ls'; language, law and learning, the common wealth of the Commonwealth. They allow the Commonwealth of Learning to do much of its work simply by facilitating the sharing of approaches, experience, expertise, materials and technology between countries. Much of that sharing is between developing countries, which we call in the jargon 'south-south' cooperation.

African countries can often learn more usefully from South Asia than from the industrialised world. The 12 Commonwealth island states in the Pacific and Indian oceans can learn much from the 12

Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean. In all, 32 states of the Commonwealth, nearly two thirds of the total membership of 53, are small states. They are the islands that I have mentioned, plus Cyprus and Malta; landlocked states like Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland; and coastal states with small populations like Belize, Brunei-Darussalam, Guyana, Namibia and The Gambia. All these states share common challenges.

But these countries also have common bonds with the larger states of the Commonwealth. All Commonwealth countries have been shaped by the migration of people. For some the migration was forced, as in the slave trade and the shipping of prisoners to Australia. For others it was semi-voluntary: as for the many indentured labourers from South and East Asia whose descendants are everywhere in today's Commonwealth. For yet others it was entirely voluntary: the millions of people who, like me, and like tens of thousands of our fellow citizens of Vancouver, have migrated here from another Commonwealth or non-Commonwealth country.

The Jamaican-born scholar, Stuart Hall, who was once my colleague at the UK Open University, has pointed out that culture is more about routes, spelt R-O-U-T-E-S, than about roots, spelt R-O-O-T-S. The trajectories that we and our families follow define us better than the origins of our distant ancestors. Living here in Vancouver you cannot fail to be impressed by the extent of the contemporary movement of people. New routes of migration are giving culture new roots.

I joined the Commonwealth of Learning in June last year. Since then I have visited 20 Commonwealth countries and found that the past and present links between them are very real. I shall comment only on links in the countries that I visited, but similar relationships exist in the other 33 states.

In January I was in West Africa. My hosts in Ghana took me to the Castle at Cape Coast that was the main centre of the British slave trade. Somewhere between twelve and twenty million African people were taken out from there, through what they called The Door of No Return, to the waiting ships.

Some of those people were the ancestors of many of the wonderful people that I met in a ten-day trip to the Caribbean soon afterwards. Seeing both ends of the slave route in a short space of time brought home to me the enormity of this blot on human history and the horror of this shameful example of man's inhumanity to man. Today, as we celebrate the fellowship between Commonwealth countries, we must not forget the terrible triangular trade that linked Britain, West Africa and the Caribbean for more than a century.

But today the links are positive. Sometimes Commonwealth countries help each other through difficulties.

Britain helped to end the civil war in Sierra Leone, where COL is now helping to rebuild a shattered education system. Australia has done a brilliant job in restoring order in the Solomon Islands. New Zealand and the EU are now strengthening the schools in the Solomons and COL is supporting the expansion of village Internet centres that are proving a boon in a country where communication is very difficult. Canada has been part of the multi-national force that patrols the Green Line, the scar that

continues to divide the island of Cyprus.

Some countries play an important regional or Pan-Commonwealth role. Fiji is headquarters to the University of the South Pacific, which serves many countries scattered across a vast ocean. Malta is a centre of expertise in eGovernance for the whole Commonwealth.

Kenya is home to the African Virtual University, which, with support from Canada and the UK and strong links with COL, is spearheading the expansion and improvement of higher education throughout the continent. New Zealand hosted last year's Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. Forty countries were present and the cool climate of New Zealand's South Island in winter only heightened the warmth of the exchanges.

Some countries act as centres of expertise for their neighbours or pioneer exemplary developments. In The Gambia COL has built on the idea of peer health education, borrowed from schools in Nova Scotia, and dramatically increased its impact by empowering Gambians to use video media and create a system of village cinema. The government believes this has arrested the spread of HIV/AIDS.

As the expansion of distance learning has become a key policy for the Commonwealth countries of West Africa, Nigeria's Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning is a catalyst for developments all along the coast. COL is also helping Nigeria to rebuild its Open University. Previous military governments had closed it twice, because open universities, even more than college campuses, are motors of democracy, equity and transparency.

That is why India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, with an enrolment of 1.5 million students, is becoming a beacon for the whole world. COL has helped IGNOU and the three other open universities of South Asia, in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, jointly to develop a Commonwealth Executive MBA programme and a similar Master's of Public Administration. IGNOU is also working with Commonwealth institutions as far away as the University of Guyana.

I returned this weekend from Pakistan where I had attended an award ceremony for these programmes. My COL colleague, Asha Kanwar, met some of the many hundreds of students, all senior managers in the private or public sectors, who are now benefiting from them.

Teacher training is a critical bottleneck in achieving universal primary education. Sri Lanka has been particularly active here, hosting a South Asia consortium of teacher education and producing a Master's programme in Teacher Education that COL hopes to extend around the Commonwealth.

Two very different island countries, Samoa and Singapore, also play a Commonwealth role. Samoa, whose Minister of Education, Fiamé Mata'afa, long represented the Pacific on COL's Board of Governors, has been at the centre of pan-Pacific cooperation in basic education. Singapore has hosted workshops for African teacher educators and wants to help the development of eLearning in the context of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which is an initiative of their Ministers of Education.

In most of the world when we talk about gender equity in education, we mean getting more girls into school. However, in parts of the Commonwealth, notably the Caribbean and Southern Africa, the challenge is the poor performance and low retention of boys in school. Trinidad and Tobago believes it is making inroads on this problem by using technology and COL will help share this valuable expertise. Barbados, like many countries, is mainstreaming children with disabilities into the regular classrooms and seeks help with training teachers to handle this new challenge.

In most Commonwealth countries agriculture faces the opportunities and the threats of changing terms of trade. In India, Grenada, Jamaica and Tanzania COL is using media, sometimes video, sometimes Internet kiosks, to give farmers the opportunity for lifelong learning. Once again, the ease of cooperation within the Commonwealth, based on our common wealth of language, law and learning, is a huge asset.

Finally, I suggest that what we should celebrate above all, on this Commonwealth Day, is the solidarity between the member nations that makes each try to help with the problems of others. I refer particularly to the response to the hurricanes in the Caribbean and the tsunami in Asia that hit Commonwealth countries particularly hard.

But I refer also to the political campaign to remove the barriers to development. I note, for example, Canada's consistent insistence on gender equity in all its aid programmes. I applaud the attempt by the UK, following the work of its Africa Commission, to use its role as this year's chair of the G8 to create the sea changes in policy necessary to reduce poverty dramatically.

The earlier history of much of today's Commonwealth was marred by the slave trade, but then political activism led to the abolition of that trade and later to the abolition of slavery itself.

Much of today's Commonwealth is marred by abject poverty. I hope that this celebration of Commonwealth Day, here in Vancouver in 2005, can be part of a process of political activism that will lead, early in this new century, to the abolition of abject poverty.

Achieving that would be an extraordinary contribution of the Commonwealth of Nations to a better future for humankind.