Your invitation to deliver the Third Asa Briggs Lecture is honour and pleasure co-mingled; both enjoining reminiscence. On 9 November 1986, just under 18 years ago, I inaugurated a meeting in Marlborough House, the Commonwealth Secretariat’s headquarters in London, of what we called then the Expert Group on Distance Education. It was a Group I had brought together on the strength of an earlier report the year before on the Management of Technological Change in the Commonwealth. That Report had made the point that ‘the combination of satellite technology and English as the common language could be used to achieve more cost effective education systems’, with particular value for small Commonwealth countries. Hence, the Expert Group on Distance Education. And it was, indeed, a group of most eminent experts.

Asa Briggs, Lord Briggs of Lewes, then Provost of Worcester College, Oxford, had accepted my invitation to be Chairman of the Group and was there that morning. The names of his colleagues on the Group conjure up memories of Commonwealth cooperation in education – one of the oldest of Commonwealth activities: Akin Adesola of the University of Lagos, Anastasios Christodoulou of the ACU, Marjorie Crocombe of the University of the South Pacific, Rex Nettleford of the University of the West Indies, Ram Reddy of India’s Open University, Ramon Rickett of the Middlesex Polytechnic, Ronald Watts, former Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Queen’s University in Canada, Sir Bruce Williams, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney. The Commonwealth could not have been better served, and Asa Briggs was their hands-on leader.

What could a mere Secretary General say to them as they embarked on their journey towards a Commonwealth of Learning - words that were to become the title of their Report. I have revisited what I did say, and it included this:

*And so, if I have a single piece of advice to offer you, it is to encourage you to be bold and imaginative in your thinking, in your conception, in your design. Devise a strategy which is forward looking and points the way for decades, rather than years. Not everything can be done at once; but help to give us a vision of where we are going.*
Asa Briggs’ Expert Group did just that. It gave us a vision of where we should be going. Their Report entitled, as I have said, ‘Towards a Commonwealth of Learning’ advanced ‘a proposal to create the University of the Commonwealth for cooperation in distance education’. At the heart of the proposal, in language they used in the Report (para 156), was this:

Our long term aim is that any learner, anywhere in the Commonwealth, shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide College or University in the Commonwealth. The new institution would seek to achieve this by working in a cooperative partnership with existing Colleges, Universities and other institutions of post secondary education.

It was a noble vision, and it has endured.

The following year, Commonwealth Education Ministers gave the proposal their blessing and later that same year in Vancouver, Commonwealth Heads of Government, elevating the subject to one of primacy in the whole area of Commonwealth functional cooperation, ‘welcomed’ the Briggs Report, commended it ‘as an imaginative and constructive approach to meeting urgent educational needs in member countries’, recognised that ‘its proposals could usher in a new era of Commonwealth cooperation and significantly widen learning opportunities for young people and adults throughout the Commonwealth’. They specifically welcomed the Group’s long term aim in the language I have already quoted and pledged to work towards that end. The next year, Asa Briggs became the first Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning. Today, that institution, whose architecture was his vision and whose foundations he laid, is in its 15th year and is holding here in the Pacific the 3rd Pan Commonwealth Conference on Open Learning, a Forum whose practical importance to education in the Commonwealth is attested to by your presence in such numbers.

Dr Dhanarajan, until recently the eminent President/CEO of COL, as it is now familiarly known in Commonwealth education circles, issued me the invitation which this Lecture fulfils a year ago. It was not one I could decline. I have maintained contact with Commonwealth education over the years since I ceased to hold formal office – essentially through my Chancellorships of the University of Warwick in England and the University of the West Indies in the Caribbean. But I have never been far from the mission of the Commonwealth of Learning and though the remarks I make in this Lecture have no direct relationship to education, but span a much wider canvas, I cling to the vision embodied in Asa Briggs’ long term aim for COL that any learner, anywhere in the Commonwealth, shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth. I hope that vision will inspire this Forum and inform its deliberations. I join you at the Forum in paying tribute to Dr Dhanarajan for his service to the Commonwealth and to education in particular. And I welcome his most distinguished successor, Sir John Daniel.

But this Lecture is about Asa Briggs’ wider vision too; and that vision encompassed in an unpretentious way a most enlightened view of the larger world – the world beyond Sussex and Oxford, beyond Britain and, of course, beyond COL and the Commonwealth. He was a
citizen by choice of our country the Planet; and it is to those themes that so infused all he did that I will speak. I have called what I will say: Compulsions of Oneness.

Some of you were born after the photograph behind me was taken, and have grown up with it as a commonplace; others of my vintage were on hand to be startled by its newness. For all of us it is well to recall that it was only three and a half decades ago that for the first time humans saw our planet in space from outside itself. ‘Earthrise’ was at once a stirring and a sobering experience. We needed no confirmation that the world is round; we had long worked that out for ourselves; but that was homo sapiens; what homo sentiens had consistently, almost stubbornly, refused to acknowledge is something that the sight of the planet in the round made palpable: that the world is whole; that there is no North or South, no East or West; there is only one Planet Earth, one small and indivisible human habitation in a vast and remote cosmos. It was a glimpse of global reality we badly needed, and one we still need to hold in focus; never to forget.

As a human stood on the moon for the first time and looked at the Planet from which he had journeyed, what he saw above all was oneness: one world, not the several, separate worlds we strive so hard to sustain. How petty from that vantage point are the divisions of race and tribe, of creed and country - those lines drawn on maps and engraved in our minds - which remain central features of the 'civilisation' of which we boast. That glimpse of ‘Earthrise’ should help us here on earth to view the world with new eyes. So, let us leave it there – at least for a while.

The trouble is that in a subliminal sense there are as many worlds as there are beholders of it here on earth. The world just does not look the same from a stock exchange on Wall Street as it does from a bazaar in Cairo, from a vineyard in France or a paddy-field in China, from a penthouse in Zurich or a favella in Rio, from the plains below Mount Fuji or the foothills of Kilimanjaro. All those varied, contrasting, contradictory perceptions keep us blind to our reality of oneness.

When four centuries ago John Donne wrote so memorably that 'no man is an island entire of himself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the maine', he was revealing in his mystic way a truth which has taken all those hundreds of years since then to come into full bloom. Two years ago, in the University of Warwick’s Caribbean Series, MacMillan published a small book of some of my addresses over the years on Caribbean subjects. I called it ‘No Island is an Island’. That title, of course, had special Caribbean resonances. It was intended to convey my conviction that the insularities endemic to our archipelagic reality are much more than a challenge to regionalism - they are a denial of an even more basic element of Caribbean reality - the fact that we are, in Blake’s idiom, a piece of the world, a part of the global neighbourhood - the Caribbean in a wider world. They might have been reflections on the Islands of the South Pacific, including your own Islands.

Donne went on to assert, you will recall - writing of the narrow nationalisms of 17th century Europe with its pervasive sense of separateness and division - that 'Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee’. He was uttering here a profound truth which, save for the most
sensitive of humankind, has failed to be acknowledged over the centuries - until now. Only in our time has it become unmistakably the dominant reality of human existence. That first photograph of Planet Earth taken from space in 1969 served dramatically to confirm the reality of the global neighbourhood.

In that neighbourhood, wrongdoing does not only derive from evil intent or imperious power. It derives more insidiously from a blinkered preoccupation with ourselves and indifference to the global society around us. I remember one Commonwealth Prime Minister petulantly questioning my reference to ‘international society’; ‘there is no such thing’. No, it was not Rob Muldoon. What she meant, I inferred, was that there is no obligation at the international level for us to behave ‘sociably’ to each other. ‘Neocons’ are not new.

Yet intimations of a global society have been plentiful, save only for those who will not see. They have been reinforced recently by the appearance of a growing number of issues on the global agenda that affect all countries and all people - issues no country - not even the richest and most powerful - can successfully tackle on its own, but which require cooperative, global action. There have been many such issues: environmental issues such as global warming, nuclear proliferation, global economic instability, the persistence of extreme poverty and deepening economic inequalities, drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime, arms smuggling, and now international terrorism.

With increased global interaction through trade, travel and tourism has come greater exposure to infectious diseases, which have spread beyond the areas with which they were earlier associated. Diseases like tuberculosis are no longer problems primarily for wretchedly poor developing countries. HIV/AIDS, once associated with swinging lifestyles in such affluent areas as California, is now a massive challenge to sub-Saharan Africa, to such populous countries as China and India and to small Caribbean countries. Here in the Asia-Pacific Region, SARS was a grim and sudden reminder of how vulnerable we all are within our global neighbourhood. Rich countries cannot insulate themselves from the impact of these developments.

We tend to associate our time with the flowering of human genius and the explosion of human prosperity. And in some respects we are right to do so; but not in all respects. One hundred years ago as the 19th Century turned into the 20th the ratio of average income of the richest country in the world to that of the poorest was 9 to 1. On Millennium Eve, as the 20th Century turned into the 21st, that ratio had risen to 60 to 1. Today, the average family in the United States is 60 times richer than the average family in Ethiopia - or in America’s own Hemisphere, 40 times richer than the average family in Haiti. Inequality has been rising too within many countries, including rich ones, since the early 1980s.

These are the shameful realities of our imperfect global neighbourhood.

On the eve of the Earth Summit in Johannesburg marking a decade since Rio, the *Guardian* newspaper in London published a portrayal of our world warped by poverty. It took the countries of the Earth and adjusted their size to reflect their wealth and poverty. The result was startling. I am projecting it for you to see. Recognise what has happened.
Sub-Saharan Africa has virtually disappeared. Caribbean countries, countries already small, have been reduced by between 25 and 99 percent, and some have simply disappeared – as have most South Pacific Islands. Rich countries have enlarged by between 100 and 400 percent, New Zealand among them but at the lower end of the scale. Compare that map with what the world still is to geographers (over on the left of the map); but ask yourselves: which is nearer to reality? Tagore wrote at the end of the 19th century of ‘the few being more than the many’. What would he have written a 100 years later when the many have begun disappearing?

Yet how complacent the world is: except, of course, the sufferers. They are not complacent. They hurt; they know that others don’t; and they are angry. History taught us long ago that a national society cannot be sustained if power, privilege, and prosperity are the prerogatives of only a few, with deprivation, degradation, and despair the lot of the many - two nations in one state, ‘the privileged and the people’, as the 19th century British Prime Minister, Disraeli, described them. Why should we think world society can be sustained when such disparities prevail within it? Yet, we induce complacency; asking ‘what world society?’

In a general sense, it is probably true that insecurity is the root cause of all conflict. But the unspoken premise of that proposition usually is that by ‘insecurity’ we mean a threat to physical security, violence of all kinds, aggression from beyond borders, oppression from within them. But ‘insecurity’ has another face, and for most of the people of the world – not all, but most - it is that face of insecurity they see. For these people, it is not aggression or oppression that strikes terror in their hearts and devastates their lives - it is poverty; the human insecurity of impoverishment - worsened when it occurs in the midst of plenty. Poverty today blights the lives of billions of humans – people who the Commission on Global Governance described as the world’s ‘marginalised global underclass’.

What afflicts the hungry, the homeless, the destitute, the unemployed, those who are ill without health care, who are cold without heating, who are old without social support - is lack of security. For them, ‘security’ is a meal, a roof, a job, medicines, warmth and relief from poverty in general. Their insecurities may be less dramatic than the physical insecurities of war or repression. But they are as real and as pressing - and represent for them the most immediate denial of their rights as human beings and the most urgent need for redress.

Last month (16 June 2004) four leading charities, ActionAid, CAFOD (Just One World), DATA (Debt AIDS Trade Africa) and OXFAM took out a fullpage advertisement in the London Guardian calling on the British Government to accelerate aid increases.

The idea that rich countries should give 0.7% of their GNP for global development was first proposed in 1969 in the Report on International Development, led by former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson. This figure has been widely accepted as a reference target for official development assistance. Endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1970, it was part of the international development strategy for that decade. More recently, the target has been unofficial in The Millennium Declaration, the Monterrey Consensus, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development.
Over 3 decades later, the target is still a distant one – for all save a few. If members of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (the world’s 23 largest donors) actually delivered official development assistance equal to 0.7% of their GNP, aid would be $165 billion a year—three times the current level and well above current estimates of what is needed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The globalised underclass in our one world can take little comfort in these promises.

It is in this unequal world that small countries, and small island countries very especially, are being required to make their way to the siren song of ‘globalisation’ in the area of world trade.

Many years ago, I played a small part in institutionalising the concept of ‘Asia-Pacific’, certainly in Commonwealth terms. That is now not enough. The G77 of which New Zealand was a founder member – a fact a new generation may not remember – has now evolved into the G90 – the Group of the world’s developing countries. This month, in Mauritius the South Pacific will be represented at the Ministerial Meeting of the G90 working together with the rest of the developing world to forge a joint negotiating position for the important WTO Meeting later in Geneva.

There it is crucial that developing countries demonstrate the solidarity they had shown at Doha and at Cancun in making those Meetings – despite the effort of Western spin to characterise them differently – the important successes for global equity that they were. The small islands of the South Pacific know that they are part of the wider world which they must help to make less unequal and less unjust. For them, nothing will be more important in this time of challenge than the clear vision of which I spoke earlier that ‘no island is an island’ any more. So let me return to our glimpse of ‘Earthrise’.

In Derek Walcott’s ‘OMEROS’ are some lines that speak of the people of the Caribbean Sea:

Why waste lines on Achille, a shade on the sea floor?
Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture
is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor,
deeper than it seems on the surface; slowly but sure,
it will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time.

Those words are as pertinent to the South Pacific, as relevant to New Zealand. But, in truth, they resonate for all the world’s people. Whether we acknowledge it or not – and some do not - the fluent sculpture of Time has already changed us all into one inseparable humanity. But it is change that from generation to generation is subjected to convulsions from which that quiet culture must recover. They are convulsions that test us; but empowered generations can overcome them. We must never lose faith that Time will persistently refine its fluent sculpture.

The present is such a moment of convulsion. Three decades after our glimpse of Earth in space, September 11, 2001 gave that perception of global oneness a dramatically new stimulus. When the bell tolled in New York for the victims of vile terrorism, the nationals of at least 36 other counties among them, it tolled in New Zealand too; when the bell tolled in
Afghanistan for the victims of ‘friendly fire’ or sheer wanton bombardment, it tolled in my Caribbean; when it still tolls in Iraq for the innocent victims of an arrogant imperium it tolls for people everywhere. There are no safe havens for rich or poor, for strong or weak, for men, women or children, for continents - or for islands. We are all one, naked to the storm winds blowing across our small planet.

The American assertion today is that it acknowledges no constraint on any action it chooses to take in whatever it asserts to be the interest of America. And indeed it has not failed to be noticed that each war fought by the United States since the Gulf War ‘has crossed a new line, with a less secure legal and international foundation than the one which preceded it.’ (see London Guardian of 22 Aug 2002)

In pursuing its course of military aggression against Iraq America has set a disastrous global precedent for ‘unilateral pre-emptive attack’ – one that is likely to prove a watershed not only in the Middle East, but in the entire relationship between the United States and the rest of the world. In doing so in defiance of the will of the United Nations and the protests of the world’s people, America has devalued our civilisation and its own highest traditions. Remember Suez! It was America’s intervention that prevented the bombing of Cairo by Britain and France (and Israel) and upheld international law and the authority of the United Nations. This time, the warriors defied the Security Council and world opinion and engaged an illegal war against Iraq. Shed no tears for Saddam; he was a monstrous tyrant; but weep for humanity, for the manner of his going could herald a larger tyranny – a tyranny of dominion above the law that threatens all the world. And, not just in Iraq, America has unleashed an imperium whose hunger for dominion and the display of primacy in all areas of human endeavour will drive it to the furthermost corner of the world. No one, not even today’s allies, will be safe.

And let us remember, especially today, as we redefine sovereignty to accommodate compulsive occupation, that the end of the formal war in Iraq does not mean peace. Peace is more than the absence of war. Byron’s verse about the Roman super-power in an earlier era has an eerie resonance today:

Mark! Where his carnage and his conquests cease –
He makes a solitude and calls it – peace!

Updating Tacitus, Byron was writing of the Romans subduing the Scots in the Battle of the Grampians. An earlier super power’s excesses that have relevance for this City’s heritage. How consistent is the bestial arrogance of power unconstrained! But how consistent too the limits to power in our global neighbourhood! Limits all too obvious now.

The triumph of unilateralism is already proving illusive. World domination in the 21st century is at odds with too much that is also part of the 21st century. It involves too sharp a turning away from the multilateralism that - with US leadership in critical areas, like decolonisation – has characterised the most intensive effort at global governance in all of human history. It is too large a contradiction of the reality of global oneness and the evolution of human values
of respect for life, for liberty, for justice and equity, for mutual respect, for caring and integrity. It is too much the antithesis of democracy within and between nations. It is too flagrant a derogation from the old but still sturdy norms of sovereignty and self determination. It struts the global stage with arrogance and even with revolutionary fervour. But the truth is that it is absurdly old fashioned – a throwback to earlier human instincts of dominance.

Finally, let us remember some of the great traditions of the American nation- including earlier stands against imperialism - and be mindful that, in time, it will return to more virtuous ways in the spirit of those traditions and stand once again on the side of internationalism. We must not then look back on this time of challenge as one in which we failed to be true to ourselves.

You meet here in a Commonwealth context: a context of co-mingling and co-operation. All the lessons of my experience in the Commonwealth taught me that standing steadfastly and without apology for the values the Commonwealth espoused was the only way to be true to those values and the only way to ensure that they eventually prevailed. Their bed-rock was internationalism and an end to dominion. A new imperium, under whatever guise and from whatever quarter, is an assault on those values and a challenge to the Commonwealth as their embodiment. Remember, there is no such thing as ‘liberal imperialism’; it is an oxymoron unworthy of the 21st Century. So, from the historic resolution of the paradox that confronts humanity, the Commonwealth cannot abstain; any more than can any part of our larger global neighbourhood.

Indeed, the future of the Commonwealth, with multilateralism as its credo, cannot avoid the implications of which way the world goes. If the wider world comes under the sway of a new imperium with a few members of the Commonwealth among the new rulers of the world and others, the great majority, among the ruled, the Commonwealth itself will suffer a sea change which may prove too much for even its resilience. All the more reason then for a Commonwealth stand for multilateralism now.

When all it said about the compelling need for global governance arrangements that respond in a mature and enlightened way to the challenges of our time, I suspect that humanity will shut its eyes to those compulsions until we understand in our minds that they derive from the reality of human ‘oneness’ – until, that is, we relegate the myths of ‘otherness’ to the thrash can of history. We need a spark to ignite our responses to the grave and present dangers that all humans face. That spark should be the blinding realisation of our ‘oneness’, of our inseparable humanity, of our common future as one species sharing one Earth.

In 2020, as the Commonwealth of Learning marks its 30th anniversary, will we look back on the first decades of the 21st century as a time when humanity remained obdurate and mired in its ancient mythologies, or as one of enlightenment when we opened our minds and our eyes to the true message of ‘Earthrise’. I have no doubt that it is our collective responsibility as the citizenry of our one world to make them that time of enlightenment.

Asa Briggs, I am sure, would have concurred.