

Notes for The Royal Commonwealth Society (Vancouver Island Branch) Dinner Meeting



*The Royal Commonwealth Society
(Vancouver Island Branch)*

*Dinner Meeting
Imperial Inn, Victoria, Canada
Wednesday, September 18, 1996*

*Notes by
Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan
President, The Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver*

Thank you, Mr. President, for your kind welcome. I am grateful for your invitation to speak to you because the Commonwealth Society has long been a strong and important non-government pillar of the Commonwealth. You have, through your interest in and compassion for this group of nations, enabled those of us who are its servants to go that extra mile beyond our call of duty to serve its mission. To keep you informed is not only a privilege but an obligation which I am pleased to meet. This occasion also enables me to pay public tribute to the people and the Government of this Province for being host to The Commonwealth of Learning, the first international inter-governmental organisation located here with substantial support from Canada. The immense kindness and abundant generosity we have received does British Columbia proud and has brought you widespread credit and respect throughout the Commonwealth.

Unique among international agencies, the Commonwealth has a great tradition of learning from each other. As the 53 nations approach the next millennium, most of them face almost similar problems in areas such as economic liberalisation, democratisation and constitutional design, civil service reform and the efficiency and accountability of their public institutions, provisions and funding for health care and social security, taxation, heritage conservation, environmental protection, resource development and management

and utilisation of the new technologies. Fundamental to all of these is a sound and well-functioning educational system; Commonwealth nations share some vital similarities in the way their member states provide education for their people and the challenges these systems face by the increase in demand, decrease in resources and clamour for quality, equity and relevance.

Unlike earlier times, education is no longer just an initiation into social and economic life; the ambition today is to make the acquisition of knowledge a lifelong activity in which the school becomes the laboratory for making individuals mature learners with an autonomous capacity to self learn outside school throughout their lives. Commonwealth countries, like many other parts of the world, have come to realise that learning has become synonymous with increase in wealth, health, productivity, social mobility, equity, cultural and human rights and participatory citizenship. However, there is a fairly big gap between the realisation and the capacity to deliver that education. This has to do with the volume and the speed at which educational provisions have to be made.

Consider this:

. Even as we approach the 21st century, the level of inequality between those who have and have not continues to be appalling - nowhere is this as glaring as in education. There are roughly 900 million illiterates in the world; most of them in the developing world and about 65% are women.

. World-wide, 130 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 are deprived of schooling. In some parts of Africa, the average school life expectancy is about 350 days (as compared to Canada where a child can enjoy up to 3,100 days of school).

. One sees the greatest disparities in higher education. In Canada, for example, there is roughly 5,102 students per 100,000 head of population as compared to, say, 16 in Mozambique, the newest member of the Commonwealth. By the year 2020, it is expected that the nations of the world may have to provide about 150 million places in post-secondary institutions just to maintain an average of 12% participation rate in the relevant age cohort.

. Outside of this kind of grim statistic are other qualitative disparities - lack or very poor faculty, learning materials, teaching materials, ill-equipped laboratories, libraries, etc.

Mr. President, the statistics relating to the disparities between the better off parts of communities and the worse off are both depressing and frightening. If there is to be a new world order where there is equality of opportunities for all in terms of justice, decent living, social mobility, health, personal security and cultural and human rights, then developing that most important capital of all - the human capital - is imperative. It is in everybody's interest to develop this capital if we wish to see a change that will help bring

about a better planet for all of us to live.

What if we do not educate?

Unless basic levels of literacy are achieved and unless the better educated far exceed the lesser educated, then the problems that confront humanity from the growth of populations to the management of the environment are not going to be accomplished. A few examples of consequences:

. For starters, population growth is taking place mostly in poorer, rural and less educated parts of the environment. Due to the pressures of consumerism and a flow of information regardless of regional, national or social boundaries, those who do not HAVE will move towards environments where they think they can have. Urban migration is inevitable and with it the increasing frustration of the inability to compete with smarter city people. Add to this, the challenges of living in cities which break down in terms of security, health and educational services, housing and other social amenities; it is predicted that social refusal, crime, substance abuse and other socially disruptive behaviours will surface to epidemic proportions from such marginalised migrants.

. Rapid technological changes that are taking place will become unavailable or unusable to the less educated and illiterate. With this comes the inability once again to compete, trapped by the vicious cycle of poverty and frustration. Humanity cannot afford to marginalise two-thirds of its species and expect to live in a safe and trouble free world.

. By the year 2000, in Asia alone, some 80 million hectares of land will be deforested annually; due to the intensification of mining and industrial activities, we can expect a five- to ten-fold increase in air and water pollution, add to that, perhaps, a 300% increase in motor vehicles; the degradation of the environment brought about by communities that lack the basic knowledge to stop this downward slide calls for massive investment in educating the ordinary person on this continent, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe.

Driven by a desire that the people of the Commonwealth, who represent more than one billion of the human family, must and CAN have access to knowledge, regardless of where they live and whether they are rich or poor; our leaders who met in Vancouver in 1987 wanted to create a new kind of international movement to bring education within the reach of countless millions throughout the Commonwealth.

Where educating masses was once considered an impossible task - it no longer is. The past 30 years has seen a revolution in the way people can be taught. The convergence of the electronic, communication, entertainment and knowledge industries has given us tools and instruments to educate the individual effectively and cost efficiently. It is this consideration that prompted leaders of the Commonwealth to create The Commonwealth of

Learning. Keeping with the best traditions of the Commonwealth, my colleagues and I have been mandated to facilitate the exchange of information, knowledge and materials and provide training in the techniques and technologies of delivering education to vast numbers of people speedily and inexpensively. In the last six years that we have been in existence, we have assisted almost ALL the countries of the Commonwealth in one way or another. All it takes is a small contribution on our part to bring about large changes to the lives of untold millions through education as a principal agent of change.

In this age of advanced communications technologies, the education of millions is within our grasp. For the first time in human history we can liberate millions from the bondage of ignorance and give them access to knowledge and a better life. It is an awesome but noble challenge. Education, more than any other activity of the Commonwealth, has been a great binder of our nations and its peoples. Like any other agency of this kind, The Commonwealth of Learning needs advocates to support it to conduct its business. Popular governments, for one reason or another, often fall short of the energy that is needed to sustain activities such as the ones we were set up in the first place to fulfil. Through friends such as yourselves, I hope we can continue to excite governments around the Commonwealth to support us in this endeavour. A Commonwealth populated by people with knowledge, skills, intellect and the desire to participate in decision making cannot be a bad thing. It is what good governments are all about.