

Speaking Notes
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Speaker of the Senate of Canada

**Address to the Commonwealth Heads of Mission,
Ottawa
Wednesday, February 29, 2012**

Excellencies,
Dean Abola,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

It is with great pleasure that I join you here today. I would like to begin by extending a personal word of thanks to the Dean of the Commonwealth Heads of Mission, His Excellency George Marino Abola. Dean Abola, you have had a long and distinguished career working in the private sector and in government. As the Ugandan High Commissioner to Canada and the Dean of Commonwealth Heads of Mission, you are a great example of what makes this organization so unique. I very much look forward to learning more of your experiences and your perspective on the issues facing the Commonwealth. I am also honoured to be in the presence of a group as distinguished as this and to speak on the subject of the Commonwealth and its place in an emerging multi-polar world.

We meet today at a fitting moment in the history of the Commonwealth. Three weeks ago, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her Diamond Jubilee, marking the 60th anniversary of her accession to the Throne. Over the coming months, people from across the Commonwealth will have the opportunity to thank Her Majesty for her lifetime of service and dedication. Events have been planned

from Australia to St. Lucia, and will culminate in the lighting of two-thousand and twelve beacons across the Commonwealth in June.

Canada is honouring Her Majesty with the creation of “The Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.” This commemorative medal will be awarded to those who have made a unique contribution to Canada through community service work. The medal bears the Queen’s name and portrait and represents a token of our appreciation for Her Majesty. On behalf of all Canadians, I wish to offer my congratulations to the Queen on her Diamond Jubilee and my best wishes on a truly deserved year of celebrations.

Today’s gathering represents an opportune moment for another important reason. On March 12th – in less than two week’s time – the Commonwealth will celebrate its annual day of observance. The theme for Commonwealth Day 2012 is “Connecting Cultures,” a fitting theme given the truly diverse nature of our partnership.

March 12th also marks the 63rd anniversary of the modern Commonwealth. In 1949, almost 63 years ago, Heads of State from Australia, Britain, Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), India, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, and the Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs met in London and deliberated over six days. Their discussions resulted in the adoption of the *London Declaration*, which opened the group up to new member-states and changed its name from the “British Commonwealth” to the “Commonwealth of Nations.”

The *London Declaration* was a milestone for the Commonwealth and re-shaped it into its present form. Following independence, India expressed its desire

to become a republic, though to remain part of the Commonwealth. In order to do so, states needed to revise the membership criteria to allow countries with republican constitutions to become members. Member states agreed to this change and in so doing opened the door for other like-minded countries who had adopted republican constitutions or who had a national monarch of their own to become members. The *London Declaration* marked a pivotal moment for the Commonwealth; a moment when its colonial legacy was transformed into a partnership based on equality and consensus.

Committed to racial equality and national sovereignty, the Commonwealth soon became the natural association of choice for many nations during the decolonization period. Ghana became the first majority-ruled African country to join in 1957, and over the next two decades the Commonwealth's membership expanded rapidly throughout Africa, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and the Pacific. Expansion has continued to this day, with the Commonwealth of Nations proud to welcome Rwanda as its newest member in 2009.

From its original grouping of eight nations, few could have foreseen the degree to which the Commonwealth would grow since its foundation. For example:

- Today, it is comprised of 54 members representing over 2 billion people;
- Sixteen member states have Queen Elizabeth II as their Head of State; five have their own national monarchy; and 33 are republics;
- Commonwealth members amount to more than one-quarter of those of the United Nations; 20% of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; 40% of the

African Union; 60% of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; and over 80% of the Caribbean Community.

It is indeed a global Commonwealth. Across continents and oceans, it has come to represent the rich cultural makeup of humankind. With its ability to bridge racial, ideological and economic divides and inequalities, it has transformed itself into an organization that represents a multicultural constituency of 54 countries and over 170 national, state, provincial and territorial legislatures. Indeed, the Commonwealth is now recognized as an organization capable of surmounting trends of division and serving the global community as a whole.

Where it was once held together by common heritage and the English language, this is no longer the case. As Mozambique and Rwanda have demonstrated – two of its newest members – today's Commonwealth derives its strength as much from its diversity as it does from its past. Former Commonwealth Secretary-General Shridath Ramphal stated:

The true value of the Commonwealth derives not from likeness or even like-mindedness, but from variety. It derives from the fact that this family facility is a commingling of the world's diversity. What the Commonwealth tries to do is to harmonize differences over a wider range and to a further degree than any other grouping.

In other words, the Commonwealth takes its strength from an ability to find commonality in the face of differences. Speaking for countries large and small, and

representing peoples of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, the Commonwealth's partnership is based on shared values.

The Commonwealth represents proof that shared values matter and that they can unite peoples of diverse backgrounds. Over the past 20 years, it has made strides to expand its commitment to fundamental shared values. In the *Harare Declaration* of 1991, leaders noted that, with the end of the Cold War, the retreat of totalitarianism, the virtual end of colonies and colonization, and the changes afoot in South Africa, the world and the Commonwealth were presented with new tasks and challenges. Consequently, the countries of the Commonwealth pledged that they would concentrate their efforts on the promotion and protection of fundamental values. These values were defined as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, judicial independence, equality and the promotion of sustainable development. The nations of the Commonwealth also committed themselves to providing universal access to education, taking action to combat drug abuse and communicable diseases, and helping small nation states with their own unique problems. Over twenty years later, the Commonwealth continues to stand for these values.

As a former professor and practitioner in the field of human rights, I realise how difficult it can be to fulfil the goals set out in multilateral declarations on human rights. However, it is important to note that taking a strong position on human rights has only reaped benefits for the Commonwealth. For example, the principled stand taken against the South African apartheid regime by member-states led to the withdrawal of its government from the Commonwealth in 1961. Racial inequality stood in stark contrast to the values and direction of the Commonwealth. Through a commitment to justice and equality on behalf of all

members, the Commonwealth played an influential role in ending apartheid in South Africa.

The anti-apartheid campaign was a defining period for the Commonwealth, and it set the standard for what it could accomplish when member-states stood together. Today, the Commonwealth continues to be active in global affairs, helping to build consensus around the world.

It has become abundantly clear that many of the world's problems, and most particularly those that will confront the generations to come, such as energy security and the environment, will require a global approach. In the coming decades, the Commonwealth has an opportunity to put its expertise to work.

The Commonwealth has an important role to play in helping to manage the globalisation of the international economy, ensuring that it leads to sustained growth and prosperity, rather than to a continuous cycle of "boom and bust." Given the nature of its composition, it has a unique ability to articulate the shared concerns of the developed and less developed nations of the world, and to speak with authority on the need to create a more stable global financial system. On a whole range of issues, from national debt concerns to the particular economic vulnerabilities of small states, the Commonwealth is well placed to be an international leader.

From a development perspective, there is and will continue to be a strong role for the Commonwealth. The *Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation* has approximately 400 experts on location in any given year, training the next

generation of leaders and providing advice on various issues, from governance and democracy, to trade, investment and private sector development.

The promotion of women's rights has also been an important area of the Commonwealth's work and I commend the organization for making "Women as Agents of Change" its theme for Commonwealth Day 2011. Women need to be included at all levels of decision-making to ensure that their needs are met and that society reflects the perspectives of all of its members. As has been seen time and again, investing in women and girls helps accelerate social, economic and political progress. Going forward, there will continue to be an important role for the Commonwealth in the area of gender and women's rights.

The issues I have mentioned represent just a fraction of the many areas in which the Commonwealth is making a valuable international contribution. On the occasion of the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Trinidad and Tobago, leaders expressed their desire to increase its impact, strengthen its networks and raise its profile. To that end, they established an *Eminent Persons Group* to examine options for reform so that the organization would emerge stronger and more effective.

The *Eminent Persons Group* released its report at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Perth, Australia this past October. Wide-ranging in its scope, the report offers proposals on promoting the Commonwealth's values, and recommends expanding the organization's role in development and trade. Significantly, the report envisages a renewed role for the Commonwealth as a champion of small states, and for greater engagement with young people. It also focuses on the importance of promoting democracy and finding new ways to

enforce the principles for which the Commonwealth stands. As recent events in the Arab world have demonstrated, the pursuit of freedom and accountable governance are universal. The Commonwealth is well placed to play a critical role in this endeavour.

I commend the work of the *Eminent Persons Group* and hope that its report will bring about constructive dialogue on how to advance and improve upon the work of the Commonwealth. The mark of any good organization is its ability to adapt and stay relevant to changing circumstances. The *Eminent Persons Group* has contributed to this important process.

I have no doubt that the Commonwealth will succeed on its path to renewal. After 63 years, it continues to fulfil an important international function by offering a global perspective on problems facing the world. Its strength and endurance is a testament to its member states. Indeed, as the world becomes ever more interconnected, the profile and relevance of the Commonwealth will only grow.

Let me close by thanking you for your kind attention and for inviting me to speak before you today. It is truly a privilege to be amongst a group of people with the wealth of talent and international experience that you possess. I look forward to our continuing fruitful discussions.

Thank you.