

Australia and the Commonwealth

By **THE HON KEVIN RUDD MP**

PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA



KEVIN RUDD

gained his BA in Asian Studies in 1981 from the Australian National University in Canberra and joined the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. In 1988 he returned to Queensland to work as Chief of Staff to the Hon Wayne Goss. Mr Rudd unsuccessfully contested the Federal seat of Griffith for the Australian Labor Party in 1996. In 1998 he again contested the seat of Griffith and was elected to the Parliament of Australia. Following the November 2001 election, Mr Rudd was appointed Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs. In December 2006 he was elected as the 19th leader of the Australian Labour Party.

Australia is a proud member and supporter of the Commonwealth – an organisation whose governments represent nearly two billion people – and I am pleased to be joining Australia’s Commonwealth friends in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, at this year’s Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, held on the occasion of the Commonwealth’s 60th anniversary.

As a mechanism for change and international cooperation, the Commonwealth successfully draws on the strengths of its broad membership to further the interests of all its members in the councils of the world. Respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights, as set out in the 1991 Harare Declaration, lie at the heart of the values we share as members of the Commonwealth. It is vital that we, as members of the Commonwealth, continue to uphold those principles. The loss of democratic freedoms inhibits the social and economic development to which all governments and peoples of the Commonwealth aspire.

The theme for this year’s Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is ‘Partnering for a more Equitable and Sustainable Future’. As we look at the depth of global challenges, it is only through revisiting and creating new partnerships – between governments, the private sector, our communities – that we can truly mobilise effective and lasting responses.

Robust democracies are based on sustainable partnerships created within societies. Commonwealth countries pride themselves on the strength of their civil society, the rule of law, media freedom and accountable government. These features of strong democracies can only be sustained through transparency, trust and mutual responsibility – principles shared and deeply valued by the countries of the Commonwealth.

Partnerships are fundamental to Australia’s international engagements, including our international development assistance programme. My government has committed to an increase in Australia’s aid budget to 0.5 per cent of gross national income by 2015 and to working towards the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Australia cannot deliver on these priorities without making use of the resources, networks and expertise of our partners. Strengthening existing partnerships, establishing new ones, and making a renewed commitment to multilateralism are therefore fundamental to Australia’s approach to global issues, and

to our engagement in the Commonwealth.

Australia has put this belief in partnerships into practice. In 2008 we reinvigorated our relationships with our Pacific Island neighbours by beginning to establish ‘Pacific Partnerships for Development’. These partnerships, which have the MDGs at their core, are based upon the fundamental principles of mutual respect and mutual responsibility.

We have also been creative in our approach to partnerships. Through the Business for Millennium Development programme, the Australian government has supported Australian businesses to operate, innovate and grow in true partnership with the communities in which they operate. Australia has also actively supported the ‘1-GOAL Education for All’ campaign, an official part of the FIFA World Cup to be held in South Africa in 2010, and designed to create a groundswell of support for global education funding.

We see partnership as the best way to achieve our shared goals. By working with partners, Australia significantly improves the effectiveness of our aid. The 2009 Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination in the Pacific was agreed at the annual Pacific Islands Forum Summit hosted by Australia in August. The Compact will drive more effective coordination of development resources from Pacific island countries and all development partners, to ensure better progress towards the MDGs.

While the focus of Australia’s international development cooperation remains the Asia-Pacific, our commitment to the realisation of the MDGs is global. For this reason Australia is extending our development assistance to other regions, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean, regions where we have warm and enduring ties, including through our association in the Commonwealth. As always, we will be looking to support our new and increased engagement in these regions through partnerships with governments, regional organisations, multilateral agencies, civil society groups and the private sector.

The theme of this year’s CHOGM is also focused on achieving a sustainable future. It is clear this year’s meeting is taking place at a time of tremendous global challenge, and that the future security and economic prosperity of the nearly two billion citizens of Commonwealth depends very much on decisions which their leaders make today.

As Commonwealth Heads of Government we have a responsibility to do what we can to address these

pressing global concerns. In particular, all countries of the Commonwealth convening in Port of Spain just weeks before the United Nations climate change conference in Copenhagen realise the urgent need for a strong global agreement on climate change.

Australia, like other Commonwealth nations, knows climate change is a great challenge. We live on one of the hottest and driest continents on earth. As we work to create a low-carbon future, we must also start to adapt to the clear consequences of climate change. The decisions the world makes today about infrastructure, health, water management, agriculture, biodiversity and housing will have lasting consequences. We must therefore begin planning now for the future.

Many Commonwealth nations are members of the Alliance of Small Island States and have first-hand experience of the impacts of climate change. Low lying island nations are particularly vulnerable to these impacts. At the Pacific Islands Forum in August, the Pacific Leaders' Call to Action on Climate Change recognised that for the Pacific Island states, climate change is the greatest challenge of our time. The Call to Action reflects concerns expressed by Commonwealth leaders in the 2007 Lake Victoria Commonwealth Climate Change Action Plan. Importantly, it also calls upon world leaders to urgently increase their ambition and to give their negotiators fresh mandates to secure a truly effective global agreement in Copenhagen.

Developed countries, like Australia, have a responsibility to assist the most vulnerable developing countries with the least capacity to respond to climate change. Increasing international support for adaptation in these countries is a key Australian objective for the global climate change agreement. And, we must make sure that this support is provided in a way that respects the unique needs of our different cultures and communities.

Australia is taking practical action now to begin addressing these needs, including by supporting our Pacific island neighbours and others through our AU\$150 million International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative. We are also committed to ensuring that the voice of small island states is heard in international fora. This is truly a global challenge. If all countries move forward together, a solution is within our reach.

The global economic crisis has presented the nations of the Commonwealth with challenges in our efforts to enhance the living standards of our peoples. We recognise that a stable international economic framework is fundamental to achieving equitable and sustainable growth throughout the Commonwealth. The economic crisis has been a wake-up call for governments around the world to re-evaluate our global system. The crisis has highlighted our growing interdependence, but also the fragility of our economic architecture.

The G20, another international grouping in which

Australia participates, has sought to put in place an agenda to tackle the global economic crisis, and move to a more sustainable and balanced model for growth into the future. There are important synergies to be drawn between the G20 and the Commonwealth. G20 members – of which five, drawn from five different continents, will be represented at CHOGM – are working together to ensure a crisis of this magnitude cannot be allowed to happen again. Leaders recognise that a strong and stable global economy relies on: strengthened financial regulation; representative, legitimate and well-resourced international financial institutions; an open trading system; strong labour markets and support for those most in need.

Significantly, the G20 has demonstrated the value of enhanced global cooperation. It reminds us that a global solution to crises is not achieved through insular policies, but rather through collective determination and action. Commonwealth Leaders have an opportunity to enhance our economic cooperation to support global recovery, particularly in the most vulnerable economies. To this end, Commonwealth leaders should support the conclusion of the World Trade Organisation Doha Development round as quickly as possible. The round would provide an important stimulus to economic activity and give a development boost for those most affected by the current economic downturn.

The nations of the Commonwealth can work together to ensure stability for today and sustainability for tomorrow. At 60, the Commonwealth has a proud record of promoting its fundamental values and working together to tackle major development challenges. As the world adapts to the changed global realities brought about by the economic crisis, and works to respond to the most pressing challenge of our time – climate change – the Commonwealth must continue to demonstrate to the world the benefits of all states, developed and developing, large and small, the benefits of working together to build a better and more sustainable future for our peoples.

It is only through revisiting and creating new partnerships that we can truly mobilise effective and lasting responses

Prime Minister Rudd meets with Prime Ministers King and Manning in New York in September 2009

