

Guided by timeless principles

By RT HON STEPHEN HARPER

PRIME MINISTER OF CANADA



STEPHEN HARPER obtained both a bachelor's and a master's degree in economics from the University of Calgary. He was first elected to the House of Commons in 1993 and in 2002 became Leader of the Opposition after winning the leadership of the Canadian Alliance. In 2003, Mr Harper co-founded the Conservative Party of Canada and went on to become the new party's leader. The Party won the 2006 election and Mr Harper was sworn in as Prime Minister on February 6 2006.

As a founding member of the British Commonwealth of nations in 1931, Canada endorsed an institution whose core values coincided with our own.

Among them were the pursuit of democracy, good governance, human rights and the rule of law – principles that are the common inheritance of countries all over the world that trace their constitutional development back to the Westminster system of responsible government.

Since those early days, the number of countries in the Commonwealth has grown, and the organisation has vastly expanded its areas of interest, reflecting the priorities of its newer members. However, the Government of Canada believes strongly in the Commonwealth's continuing role in advancing these noble ideals.

Therefore, it has always been and now remains deeply committed to the success of the organisation.

Over many decades, Canada has demonstrated that commitment with action, as well as words.

- The modern Commonwealth may properly be thought of as dating back to 1949, when India – recently granted independence by Great Britain – elected to seek membership in its own right. The Dominion of Canada welcomed this decision.
- In the name of advancing democracy, it also applauded the independence of African nations as British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan's "wind of change" – as he characterised rising nationalist aspirations – swept across the continent.
- It was in support of the principle of the equality of people before the law and at the ballot box, that the Canadian government became a vocal critic of South Africa's apartheid policies. That debate would ultimately lead to South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, in 1961.
- Later Canada provided substantial assistance to the Republic of South Africa, to secure its peaceful transition from apartheid to majority rule.
- In 1994, Canada also supported South Africa's re-entry into the Commonwealth, following the election of a multiracial government.
- Notably, Canada continues to be a major financial supporter of the Commonwealth, contributing C\$27 million to its institutions and programs in the last fiscal year, second only to Great Britain itself.

The issues change. The principles do not. They were further reinforced by the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration, at the twelfth Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

"We believe in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief, and in the individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which he or she lives."

These are challenging words.

But the Commonwealth, deriving energy from its diversity and strength from the traditions shared among its diverse and multi-cultured population, can draw from deep wells of wisdom to bring them to life.

In this respect, we think of the non-violent teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, or the magnanimity of Nelson Mandela. We might also recall with approval the vision of British statesman Arthur Balfour who, making first use of the word "commonwealth" to describe a new kind of voluntary association between nations based on mutual respect, raised the hopes and expectations of men and women all over the world.

And, so it has become.

The Commonwealth is now a creature of many parts: There are more than 80 non-governmental organisations associated with it, dedicated to trade, excellence in the professions and generating goodwill through sport.

I know, for example, that Canadian sportsmen and women look forward with keen anticipation to next year's Commonwealth Games in India, where they will compete against the best athletes from other Commonwealth countries.

These are all worthy activities.

Nevertheless, the ultimate measure of this institution's value in a troubled world remains the commitment of member governments to the elevation of liberty, and human dignity for their citizens.

It is to this end, and in this hope, that the Government of Canada prepares to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the modern Commonwealth here in Port of Spain, at the 21st Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

I look forward to lively and constructive discussions.