

Address by Australian High Commissioner John Pilbeam
to the National Assembly of the Parliament of Guyana
on 11 March 2019 - Commonwealth Day

It's fitting that we're celebrating Commonwealth Day in Guyana today because Guyana has always been among the Commonwealth's strongest supporters.

Guyana gave the Commonwealth its second Secretary-General, Shridath Ramphal, who helped manage the peaceful transition to colour-blind, democratic rule in Southern Africa and was a personal friend of two Australian Prime Ministers, the late Gough Whitlam and the late Malcolm Fraser. Both called him "Sir Sonny". When in 1982 Fraser saw to it that Ramphal was appointed an Honorary Companion of the Order of Australia - the highest Australian honour awarded to anyone from the Caribbean - it could very well have been the only decision that Fraser took and Whitlam endorsed.

More recently, Guyana's First Vice-President and Foreign Minister, Carl Greenidge served actively as Vice-Chair of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group - a position now taken up by Australia's Foreign Minister, Marise Payne.

And, perhaps most importantly to you, as Guyana the Commonwealth has had a long history of strongly and consistently supporting Guyana, and its territorial integrity.

The Commonwealth is seventy years young this year and it's worth celebrating. One third of the world's population lives in Commonwealth countries and sixty percent of them are under the age of thirty. As an institution, the Commonwealth promotes worthy common values such as democracy, human rights, good governance and the rule of law. Thirty of the Commonwealth's 53 members are small states and the Commonwealth stands up for them, including by supporting their diplomatic representation in New York and Geneva.

And of course there's always the Commonwealth Games – Troy Dorris picked up a Gold Medal for Guyana in the men's triple jump during last year's Commonwealth Games on Australia's Gold Coast. In doing a little research last week I found this wasn't just a flash in the pan – and that Guyanese had been winning medals at Commonwealth, and before then Empire, Games since 1930.

This year's Commonwealth Day theme is a “Connected Commonwealth”. Though Australia and Guyana are far apart, we hope to see our connections grow, based on the respect and understanding we both have for each other, much of it formed on the cricket field. I see good prospects for both the West Indies and the Australian national teams in England later this year as we both emerge from the painful business of team-building.

The Commonwealth can't - and shouldn't - do everything to solve all the woes of the world, of course. It's not resourced to do this and other agencies often have better technical skills. But its members have the advantage of approaching political and development problems with goodwill. Its 53 very diverse members are somehow quick to understand each other and enjoy each others' company. Perhaps this is because of the great common cultural assets we share – the English language, parliamentary democracy, the Common Law, the idea that might doesn't always make right, and of course cricket, football, netball and hockey and the Commonwealth Games. Commonwealth members can use this understanding to make effective contributions to solving pressing issues, especially where other, larger, organisations leave gaps. And that's something to celebrate.

Thank you.