

Commonwealth and Parliaments Module Self-Test
Unit 1: The Development of the Modern Commonwealth

1. Do you think that the lack of a constitution has affected the working of the Commonwealth? Should the Commonwealth consider creating one for the future?

A good way of looking at this question is to begin with the characteristics of the Commonwealth. Its membership is voluntary, members must be sovereign states, they must be responsible for their own policies but agree to act within a culture of consultation and co-operation, and finally, they must work for democracy, good governance, international understanding and world peace.

From a purely pragmatic point of view, it would be very difficult to create a legally-based constitution based on these characteristics. In 1949 when the new Commonwealth of Nations was created, it would have been even more difficult. Experience since then has shown that, for instance, while there are basic rules of membership, the association has agreed to veer away from them for special reasons to which no one has objected. One can think of the admission of Mozambique which is mentioned in this Unit. If there had been a Commonwealth Constitution in force, this could have become a difficult problem and perhaps, a divisive issue instead of a unifying act.

The Commonwealth has demonstrated that a 'free association' can do without a strict constitutional framework provided members continue to look at problems in a generous way. Many such associations acting under constitutions spend a lot of their time finding ways out of the problems that arise from them. It is doubtful, therefore, that the Commonwealth will move towards creating a constitution but will remain satisfied with the system of review which Heads of Government make every two years.

2. What should the Commonwealth be doing to remain relevant in today's societies?

We look forward to seeing your answers to this question! This is a great and continuing problem for the Commonwealth. It has to keep redefining itself and work in areas where it has

something special to contribute. These may be niches rather than global problems – What are your thoughts?

There is a tendency to downplay the worth of the Commonwealth to its members especially in the developed countries. This is partly because the Commonwealth is a network that works silently in the background all the time and therefore gets taken for granted. If however we think on the macro scale, the Commonwealth is home to roughly one-third of the world's population, covers one quarter of the world's countries and generates one-fifth of global trade. I have seen smaller figures being quoted for the last item but the Commonwealth's participation in and promotion of trade (both intra-Commonwealth and with non-Commonwealth countries) ensures a better standard of living for many of its countries than would have otherwise been the case. Even if one considers the economically-developed and richer countries of the Commonwealth, some 60% of their trade is intra-Commonwealth.

The characteristic of being a network is of great assistance especially to countries that are small and vulnerable but it extends beyond that. The last Ambassador of South Africa to the United Kingdom (that is, in the pre-Mandela days) was asked about what he thought the benefits to the 'new' South Africa would be in joining the Commonwealth. He was candid in his answer – he said that greatest benefit would be that the Commonwealth would give the new administration a network to depend upon both while it found its feet and later when it was well-established. He certainly gave the impression of someone who would have liked to have benefited from that network.

Even so, the Commonwealth has to work hard to keep itself relevant. Take youth for instance. A little under one half of the Commonwealth's populations fall into the youth category. Many of them do not know much about the Commonwealth and its potential. Much more has to be done to keep them informed as well as to help them to contribute to their economies.

3. What further activities should the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association undertake for parliamentary staff?

This is another question for the Discussion Forum, to which your answers will be most welcome. The CPA has over the years provided a range of activities for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. It started off with general seminars on parliamentary practice and procedure and then went on to post-election seminars for newly-elected legislators. As you may know, the CPA caters to both national and sub-national parliaments so these were important opportunities especially for the latter group who might not easily get the chance to see how parliaments operate in other parts of the world.

Later, Study Groups of parliamentarians were set up to look into particular problems or issues. These have ranged from the work of second chambers to scrutiny and the work of Public Accounts Committees (PACs). Some of these led to the publication of materials which have become key documents of use in the Commonwealth and outside - for instance, the report of a Study Group on PACs resulted in the publication of 'The Overseers' written up for the CPA by David McGee, then Clerk to the Parliament of New Zealand, which is now used as a standard reference in parliaments around the globe.

Another development in the 1990s was the setting up of Expert Groups. One of the first dealt with the training of parliamentary staff and, as expected, this brought together the talents of several clerks/secretaries-general and training experts. It was a pioneering publication and went into several reprints.

Other areas studied by the CPA have included the new technologies and their use in legislatures, parliament and the media, the administration and financing of parliament, parliament's role in curbing corruption, matters relating to gender – quite a wide range indeed. The challenge for the CPA is to keep exploring new work areas of relevance to Commonwealth legislatures and their staff.