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# The Commonwealth and the New Generation

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by Victoria Kellett

*Of the 1.7 billion individuals living in Commonwealth countries more than half are under 21 years of age. The future of the Commonwealth is very much in the hands of this New Generation. In recognition of this fact the Federal Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association marked its annual Commonwealth Day dinner by inviting Canada's representative to the Commonwealth Youth Programme as guest speaker. This article, based on her address to about 100 parliamentarians and diplomats, suggests that the Commonwealth is still an ideal vehicle for youth from around the world to broaden their knowledge and open their minds to new cultural experiences.*

**M**y initiation into the Commonwealth came about through a request to high schools by the National Student Commonwealth Forum (NSCF) to submit applicants to attend their yearly Forum. At the time, my experience of the Commonwealth was limited and my knowledge extended only as far as I knew that athletes competed in the Commonwealth Games. One of my teachers mentioned that students from across Canada were meeting in Ottawa under the auspices of the Forum, and when he suggested that some of us might wish to participate, quite a number of students sought the limited spots. Many of our teachers were impressed by our enthusiasm in competing to attend this Forum, however I think they would have been dismayed to realize that we viewed it as mainly a way to miss school, even if only for a short while. Eight years later I am still associated with the Commonwealth, and I look back at that opportunity as a defining moment in my life.

The aim of the National Student Commonwealth Forum is the education of young people with respect to the Commonwealth. The Forum, which has been held annually since 1973, allows young people from every region in Canada to learn about international issues, meet with Senators, MPs, High Commissioners, personnel from Foreign Affairs, and representatives from the media. Each delegation represents a country in the Commonwealth and is prepared throughout the week with the necessary tools to adequately represent the interests of their respective countries. The week culminates with a mock Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in which the students endeavour to reach consensus on various issues. The Forum is run by students, for students with the Royal Commonwealth Society providing some guidance. I began my association with the Forum first as a delegate and then as a member of the planning team. I eventually co-chaired the 25th Forum.

When I first joined the Forum I worked in many different capacities. Our committee took innovation in the program to a new height – or depth – when for the first time we entered a float in the Santa Claus Parade a few years ago. With the innocence of novices we did not realize all this entailed and it required frantic all night decorating efforts and much coercion to persuade a local farmer to

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lend us his wagon. I think the parade marshals would have preferred that we had not tried so hard because as we drove up to the assembly point the whole load fell off. However, we took our places nonetheless, wedged somewhere between the Carpentry Association of Ottawa and the Volunteer Medics. I am not sure if that was fluke or by design. However, it must have gone over well in the end because we were invited back the next year. We quit while we were ahead. Even though our inexperience must have been obvious, I could not help but be struck by the encouragement we were given to try something new. To take an idea and see it through and then to debrief after and work out for ourselves what improvements could have been made was an important learning process.

One of the most important and for me personally rewarding aspects of the week was the incredible support given the Forum by parliamentarians. One of the most profound impressions left upon everyone was the opportunity for the students not only to meet with their MPs and High Commissioners, but also the opportunity to speak in the Senate. People who accuse contemporary youth of being politically indifferent should have been a fly on the wall of the Senate when these students debated the issues of the day with intensity and growing confidence.

*In a federal system, it is particularly apt that young people from the farthest reaches of Canada come to the Nation's capital to discuss issues that ultimately affect their lives and those of their communities. Many students returned to their homes with a new zeal to bring the principles of the Commonwealth into their educational background.*

Involvement with the Commonwealth sparked an urge to travel and one of the first places I travelled to was the Commonwealth Secretariat in London. The ability for me as a young person to access individuals who are responsible for implementing change was profound and it was a meeting that I will not soon forget. This visit reinforced my desire to become more involved in the Commonwealth and soon after I began to travel quite extensively. Looking back I realize that the training provided by being a part of the Forum and then my extensive travelling prepared me well for my present role as Cana-

dian representative to the Commonwealth Youth Program (CYP).

The purpose of the Commonwealth Youth Program is to promote the Commonwealth values of international co-operation, social justice, democracy and human rights among young people in the Commonwealth. It achieves this through the participation of youth at regional meetings, having youth representatives at the Ministerial Table, and at the Youth Minister's Meeting. The recommendations we put forth directly affect government policy.

Every three years existing strategies are examined and new ones developed. For the past three years, the CYP strategies have focussed on Youth Empowerment, Human Resources Development and National Youth Policies. For many countries, these issues are very topical and they are struggling to ensure that youth are being given the opportunity for a sustainable future. Canada has been in the fortunate position to have already adopted many measures that positively affect youth, and is not experiencing the same growing pains as some fellow Commonwealth members. However, this poses its own challenge. Given that Canada is a major contributor to the program, I must draw upon our experiences while emphasizing areas where we also need further development.

The Commonwealth remained part of my education in the broadest sense. It invoked in me a desire to explore the way in which countries interact on the international scene and the hope and examples the Commonwealth provides on civilized resolution of disputes. Perhaps that prompted me to pursue a post graduate diploma in International Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Waterloo. We have certainly seen our fair share of conflict within the Commonwealth, its disturbing effect on youth and indeed in some cases, their involuntary participation as soldiers in warfare. Indeed I became aware of the combination of youth and conflict on two occasions. The first occurred during a trip to Italy where I witnessed NATO troops preparing for humanitarian action in Kosovo. One night, while watching CNN, I caught an interview where the youngest members of the U.S. military were being asked what it was like to be on their first mission and to explain what their role was. A youth no more than 18, responded that he was there to find the enemy and kill them. While the situation of Kosovo necessitated military action, I could not but reflect on the value of an organization devoted to dialogue and political sporting and cultural exchange. The whole purpose of the Commonwealth is to resolve situations before they get that far. With this year's theme, and with the strategies put forward by the CYP, I can only hope that the rec-

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ommendations we put forward will have some resonance.

The second occasion where such conflict was brought home to me was on a recent trip to the Solomon Islands for a Commonwealth Youth Minister's Meeting (CYMM). While studying at Waterloo, I understood the material provided and I recognized that conflict does happen. What I was not prepared for was to have my academic year complimented so nicely by first hand experience of international conflict. The venue for the CYMM, a triennial meeting, was to be Honiara, Solomon Islands. Give the distance, I chose Fiji as a stopover and since my academic year was over I was able to arrange a prolonged stay upon the completion of my meetings in Honiara. Less than 24 hours after arriving in Fiji, George Speight swept into Parliament taking Prime Minister Chowdhury and his Cabinet hostage. Within hours, the military took action, imposing road blocks between Nadi and Suva (the two main cities on the island) and a curfew. Communication was cut off and contact with the outside world was impossible. Not only was I not able to apprise my family of the situation, I now had no way of getting a flight to the Solomon Islands as without a pass I could not leave my hotel.

Reading newspaper articles when I returned to Canada I realized that they did not have a full account of what had really been going on. By their accounts it was a fairly benign coup. But I saw something different. I saw individual ethnic groups being targeted, homes burned, livelihoods being destroyed, people too terrified to leave their homes, children being kept back from school, looting, burning churches, and always the presence of armed individuals. Without an Embassy or even a consulate the information that would trickle back to most Western countries was diluted. I did manage to obtain a pass to get around curfew and was eventually able to negotiate a flight to the Solomon Islands, but other delegations were prevented from leaving their hotels and did not arrive in Honiara until the meeting was almost concluded.

We had been warned prior to leaving Canada that the Solomon Islands had experienced ethnic tension for decades and we were well aware of the travel advisories. Having left Fiji and the coup behind me, I now had to prepare myself for perhaps more of the same. While the hospitality and warmth extended to us was remarkable, the ethnic tension and the trickling effect of the coup in Fiji was obvious. We were unable to venture beyond certain points and while we were there several beheadings occurred less than a minute from our accommodations. We also knew that while we had extensive security, should

the ethnic tension escalate, our security personnel would disappear. They could not afford to take sides. Indeed, we had no sooner become accustomed to their presence everywhere, when our security disappeared altogether one day while we were sitting in Parliament. The unease in the room was palpable as we remembered Fiji. The Government of the Solomon Islands however, worked very hard with both groups engaged in the conflict to ensure that nothing happened during that week. With 54 Ministers present it would have caused a significant international incident. The Solomon Islands experienced their own coup less than a week later.

We accomplished much during our week in Honiara. I think we all realized the importance of what we were doing as we watched armed youth struggling amongst themselves for the few resources available. As we worked toward recommending micro-credit initiatives, fostering links between private and public sectors, ways to empower youth, encouraging the use of sport for both mental and physical well-being, educating youth about HIV/AIDS and the incorporation of a stronger youth voice in government, we could not help but be aware that these steps were key to decreasing conflict. There is nothing normal about teenagers being armed.

Having returned to Canada safely, I continued with my role. The CYP is not only about travelling and representing a country on an international scale. It is also about communicating with Canadian youth. It is a constant dialogue, one that is challenging given Canada's regional differences. It is about disseminating information and in turn learning what drives youth, what they feel is important to their future and what role they would like to play in it. My term will end far too quickly but I know that I have come too far to leave the Commonwealth behind. I am encouraged by the talent that is out there, and by the commitment of other youth such as Alicia Kennedy and David Lynch (this year's co-chairs of the NSCF), to take on the challenge of educating other youth. I commend their efforts.

The point I would like to leave with you tonight is that the support of parliamentarians and others emboldened me to get involved. When young people are encouraged to explore new frontiers and approach challenges in different ways, you are giving us something tremendously valuable. You are showing your faith in our abilities and your pride in our accomplishments. As someone who has benefited enormously from this support I am strongly committed to doing my part to see that it comes full circle.