

Address at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

4 March 2002

Your Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, Head of the Commonwealth,
The Honourable John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia,
Your Majesty,
Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government. Secretary-General,
Your Royal Highnesses
Distinguished Delegates:

On behalf of my fellow Commonwealth colleagues, I have the pleasure to express how delighted we are to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in the beautiful town of Coolom as the guests of the Australian Government. We thank you, Prime Minister Howard, for the warm welcome extended to us and the excellent arrangements made for this important Meeting.

While we have an extensive agenda and serious matters to attend to over the next four days, this is also an historic occasion and one for celebration. It is a great honour for us to congratulate Her Majesty The Queen in commemorating 50 years as Head of the Commonwealth. We pay tribute to the very active interest that Her Majesty has invested in the Commonwealth during the period of her reign.

When we last met at the CHOGM held in Durban two years ago, we focused through the Fancourt Declaration, on practical ways to address the most important challenges of people-centred development and globalisation facing the international community. We will have an opportunity here in Coolom to appraise the progress that we have since made in implementing the important decisions and programmes that we adopted in Durban.

Clearly, for the Commonwealth to keep pace with the rapidly changing world and remain a relevant and influential organisation, we must intensify our work in promoting democracy, good governance, sustainable development and ensure that we are forever at the forefront of the struggle against racism, racial and gender discrimination and xenophobia, drawing on the invaluable lessons of our work as a family of nations as well as the rich experience of our sister organisations in the international arena.

Perhaps because of the diverse nature of the Commonwealth, we are better placed than many to lead the struggle against racism, racial and gender discrimination and xenophobia.

Already, the Commonwealth has acquired a special role as an advocate of the interests of small states and Least Developed Countries. It has demonstrated its capacity for conflict resolution and peace building, and its ability to act as a bridge-builder across racial, political and economic divides and has enunciated a set of shared fundamental values. These qualities should stand us in good stead in our efforts to strengthen democracy, tackle poverty and underdevelopment and build a world of tolerance, peace, security, stability and prosperity for all our peoples.

At this Summit we shall consider important proposals from the High Level Review Group which was established in Durban to examine the role of the Commonwealth and how it should respond to the challenges of the new century.

Part of the basic response to the challenges of the new century will obviously be through the promotion of Commonwealth Fundamental Political Values which is an important item on our agenda. We must ensure that we apply the fundamental political values with consistency, even-handedness and predictability.

Through the Fancourt Declaration, the United Nations Millennium Declaration, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), we are part of an important global front that must defeat the scourge of poverty and underdevelopment.

In this regard, we should, together, ensure that we build on the advances we have made at the Development Round of the WTO at Doha.

Furthermore, we will during the course of this month, converge in Mexico to deal with critical issues of finance for development, which will be followed by the World Conference on Sustainable Development in South Africa later this year.

Clearly, all these processes are relevant to all of us here, because through our individual and collective interventions in various forums and processes, we can and must ensure that the wealth that is commonly generated uplifts the living conditions of all of humanity.

At the same time, in the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks in the United States last year, we should ensure that the fight against terrorism is a common struggle against each and every act of terror wherever it may occur and that the Commonwealth itself plays its part.

The Special Theme of our Meeting - "The Commonwealth in the 21st Century: Continuity and Renewal" - is most appropriate precisely because it will allow us to build on the successes already achieved and also focus our minds on the new challenges facing the world today,

At the same time, we should use the opportunity to do some honest introspection about the role of the Commonwealth and how it functions. One of the key aspects that we should closely examine is the way in which all members of the family collaborate with each other in a spirit of solidarity.

We have the opportunity at this meeting, to chart a specific, decisive course and provide fresh impetus for the upliftment of the living conditions and fulfilment of the dreams and aspirations of the ordinary masses of our people.

Accordingly, we will all agree that we have in place all the relevant policies. Through action we will demonstrate that this leadership of the Commonwealth has the necessary political will to turn these policies into practical programmes.

Thank you.