

# History and Evolution of the Commonwealth

February 19, 2021

## A product of history and foresight

- It came about through the powerful bonds which developed among leaders and people, notably during the decolonising process and in the early years of the Commonwealth's evolution as an association of sovereign states.
- The consequences of changes led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Kwame Nkrumah are best known, but there are several such turning points.

## Dominion Status

- In the early nineteenth century, British imperial policy began to soften under pressure for greater self-determination, initially mainly from the British-descended populations of the most advanced colonies. Canada was first to obtain self-government (in the 1840s) and also the first to become a dominion (1867).
- Dominion status, which allowed self-government and extensive independence in foreign affairs, fundamentally changed the relationship between colony and imperial power.
- It was perhaps in this spirit that British politician Lord Rosebery, visiting Adelaide in Australia in 1884, called the empire 'a Commonwealth of nations'.
- Australia achieved dominion status when its states united as the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. New Zealand followed in 1907, South Africa in 1910, and the Irish Free State in 1921. The five dominions and India had their own representation in the League of Nations, the forerunner of the UN.

- Great Britain and the dominions were characterised in the Balfour Report of 1926 as 'autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations'.
- The Statute of Westminster, passed by the UK parliament in 1931, gave legal recognition to the de facto independence of the dominions.
- The parliaments of Canada, South Africa and the Irish Free State swiftly passed legislation enacting the statute. Australia adopted it in 1942 and New Zealand in 1947. Newfoundland relinquished its dominion status and was incorporated into Canada in 1949.

### **Republican Membership**

- India and Pakistan achieved independence – as dominions and members of the Commonwealth – in 1947, and Sri Lanka followed in 1948. This laid the groundwork for the evolution of a multiracial Commonwealth.
- Then the Commonwealth faced a constitutional crisis. At the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting of 1949, it was agreed that India might remain a member as a republic but accepting the monarch 'as the symbol of the free association of independent member nations and as such Head of the Commonwealth'.
- This development opened the way for other countries which adopted republican constitutions (or had a national monarch) to become Commonwealth members.
- At the start of 2006, 37 of the 53 members did not have Queen Elizabeth II as titular head of state, but all accepted her as Head of the Commonwealth.
- The Queen is also head of state in 16 Commonwealth countries, all of them fully independent. She is head of each of these states individually.

## The timeline of the Commonwealth is listed below:

- 1887 – Lord Rosebery describes the British Empire as the Commonwealth of Nations.
- 1926 – Balfour Declaration at the Imperial Conference.
- 1931 – Statute of Westminster.
- Post World War II – British Empire was dismantled.
- 1947- India gained independence. (One of the most important colonies)
- 1949 – Ireland becomes a Republic (Republic of Ireland) and leaves the Commonwealth.
- 1950 – London Declaration, where members accepted that the head of the Commonwealth will be the British Monarch and the Commonwealth of Nations is officially established.
- 1965 – Commonwealth Secretariat is established. It is the main intergovernmental agency and its central institution.

Now, with 54 member states, the Commonwealth of Nations encompasses up to 30% of the total population in the world. In terms of area, the Commonwealth holds about one-fourth of the world's land area.