

# A case for the Commonwealth (at last!)

by Bob McMullan  
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I don't know any Australian who thinks we should not be a member of the Commonwealth. It is part of our history and heritage. Even Republicans, like me, support it.

But I know very few who could name something useful the Commonwealth has done to make lives better for the poorest people in developing country member states.

However, a recent initiative is showing very positive signs of delivering real benefits.

The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust was formed in 2011 at CHOGM in Perth. Quite obviously it was established to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. It was given a time-limited mandate and the various member states contributed money (including Australia) either directly or through fundraising efforts. The Trust has also been successful in corporate fundraising.

An independent Board chaired by former British PM, Sir John Major, was set up and the Trust Secretariat is headquartered in London. After considerable research it established the elimination of avoidable blindness and the development of youth leadership as its two priorities.

And it is starting to have an impact.

An example is the extremely welcome Trachoma Initiative in Malawi. The campaign aims to fully eliminate blinding trachoma across Malawi by 2019. The Initiative is based on a large-scale program of surgery, antibiotic distribution, facial cleanliness and environmental improvements (SAFE).

The trachoma initiative will be replicated in Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria and Uganda and Commonwealth countries in the Pacific.

The embarrassment for Australia is that this program will extend to activities in Australia due to the continuing prevalence of trachoma in some indigenous communities: the only example of the existence of this disease in any developed country.

It is too early to draw definitive conclusions but the early signs are definitely promising.

Apart from the direct benefits, the significance of this is that it may indicate a way

forward for the Commonwealth. Time limited and focussed activities with a lean and targeted administration and a clear mandate.

Independent assessments by the UK and Australia have found the Commonwealth to be a notably inefficient vehicle for delivering development assistance. It may have other diplomatic and relationship building merit, but overall it has not been successful as a development agency.

Perhaps it should move away from endeavouring to do broad-scale development and focus on a catalytic role in the development of organisations like the Trust or its successors.

*Bob McMullan was formerly Parliamentary Secretary for International Development and is Adjunct Professor at the Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University.*

### **Author/s:**

#### **Bob McMullan**

Bob McMullan has had a long and distinguished career in the Australian Parliament as one of Australia's pre-eminent Labor politicians. He is a former Parliamentary Secretary for International Development (2007-2010) and Executive Director for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

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