

Third Diversity Matters Forum
Kolkata, India, 28 February – 2 March 2005

Welcome and Introduction – Forum Day 1
8:30am, Tuesday 1st March 2005

By
Mr B. (Hass) Dellal OAM
Executive Director
Australian Multicultural Foundation

On behalf of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, co-hosts The Statesman, the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit and supporters I wish to welcome you to the *Third Diversity Matters Forum* which is the follow-up to the First Diversity Matters Forum held in Brisbane Australia in 2001, the Second Diversity Matters Forum held in London in 2003.

By way of a brief background these forums are designed to produce dialogue and encourage practical solutions fostering and celebrating cultural diversity. These forums focus on issues relevant to matters of the Commonwealth and others.

Education Ministers to use comparative analyses of faith curricula study all faiths to develop an understanding and respect and secondly to encourage the Commonwealth to initiate a study or gathering to identify multi-faith initiatives with the overall view of setting up a Commonwealth Multi-Faith Advisory Group using existing Commonwealth NGOs with experience and knowledge in this area. The Action being the Australian Multicultural Foundation to coordinate this gathering to further this recommendation. Hence this meeting. A group of people with knowledge and experience, some representing faiths, others with great knowledge on multifaith activities. This not meant to be a forum representing every faith on earth but a gathering of people who have knowledge and experience on faith and interfaith matters.

So our purpose is to share experiences, listen to opinion and knowledge, gain valuable insight to what multi-faith activities are taking place in some Commonwealth countries - how we can share and build on networks, how to further social cohesion through inter-faith networks and activities, but most importantly to recommend/present a Blueprint to the Commonwealth heads through the Secretariat and Foundation the notion of a Multi-Faith Advisory Group, that is based on people who

We have the next two days to listen and contribute and in the afternoon of the final day to bring about a practical solution to be put before the Commonwealth leaders.

The case for the Commonwealth to take a lead in championing positive and constructive cultural and religious diversity is not hard to make. Virtually every one of the 54 member nations has a rich multicultural and religious heritage. Yet many Commonwealth societies struggle with the realities of prejudice, inequality and disintegration derived from racial, cultural, religious or ethnic difference. While globalisation develops, accelerated by the emerging technologies, the opportunities to cross the barriers of prejudice and difference remain limited, whether by circumstance or perception.¹

These perceptions are formed young, often by the pressures of domestic life of the norms of the school, community or cultural environment. Yet, while some of the most intractable conflicts within nations are within the modern Commonwealth, it also includes some of the most striking examples of progress towards peaceful integration. The challenge now is celebrating these achievements, to value cultural and religious

I need to thank, firstly Ravindra Kumar and The Statesman who is our host in India and without this would not have occurred. He has put a lot of effort and time in coordinating activities in India for us.

Colin Ball, Former Director of the Commonwealth Foundation for his support and arranging for the sponsorship during his time as Director and still taking time to be here to contribute in the forum.

Richard Bourne of the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit for his support and partnership and developing all the processes for the recommendations to be presented at the current forum.

The Commonwealth Secretariat for encouraging us with our work. The Australian Multicultural Foundation (Sir James Gobbo), The Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, the European Multicultural Foundation, the British Deputy High Commission in Kolkata, the British Council for their generous support in-kind and financial.

And for the representatives from each of these institutes being present at this event. And to all other delegates.