



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Debate on Commonwealth Day:

**"Unlocking Opportunities
Together for a Prosperous
Commonwealth".**

3 March 2026

**PARLIAMENTARY
RESEARCH UNIT (PRU)**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth Day will take place on Monday, 9 March 2026. It is the highlight of a week-long series of events and activities happening around the Commonwealth – including faith and civic gatherings, debates, school assemblies, flag-raising ceremonies and cultural events. The aim of commemorating Commonwealth Day is to promote understanding on global issues, international co-operation and the work of the Commonwealth so as to improve the lives of its 1.8 billion citizens.¹

2. BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth is united by its shared ideals and common traditions derived from a historical link to the British crown and manifested in similar structures of governance, public administration and law, a common working language, commercial and business practices and understanding. It has come to adhere to certain fundamental principles, which have been set out in the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles (Singapore, 1971) and the Harare Commonwealth Declaration (1991):

- Decision making by consultation, sharing of experience and consensus rather than by vote
- International peace and order, global economic development and the rule of international law, democratic values, individual liberties and equality (gender, race, colour, creed and political belief)
- Human dignity and equality; and rejection of racial prejudice and intolerance
- Economic and social development and the removal of disparities in living standards across the world
- Commitment to human rights, poverty alleviation and peaceful resolution of issues
- Adherence to the Rule of Law
- Facilitation of investment, trade and aid.²

The Commonwealth Secretary-General, Hon Shirley Botchwey, announced the theme for Commonwealth Day 2026 as 'Unlocking opportunities together for a prosperous Commonwealth'. This theme highlights the Secretary-General's commitment to facilitate the development of transformative, equitable and high-impact opportunities across the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Secretary-General, Hon Shirley Botchwey, said³:

¹ South African Government, (2025).

² Department of International Relations and Cooperation, (2005).

³ The Commonwealth, (2026).

- “Commonwealth Day is an occasion to reflect on the strength of our connection and how it can shape our well-being as citizens of the Commonwealth.
- “This year, Commonwealth Day calls us to action, to rally together to face today’s challenges and unlock opportunities that can deliver shared and lasting prosperity for all our people.
- “Opportunity must reach people everywhere — from the smallest, most remote communities to the biggest cities. We are a family of nations whose endowments and common values position us to deliver the extraordinary benefits of a more prosperous and connected Commonwealth, if we work together.”

The 2026 Commonwealth Day theme aligns with the 2026 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) theme, ‘Accelerating Partnerships and Investment for a Prosperous Commonwealth’. CHOGM 2026 will take place in Antigua and Barbuda from 1 - 4 November.⁴

3. SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE ON COMMONWEALTH DAY

South Africa was a founding member of the Commonwealth, but found herself expelled in 1961 due to internal apartheid policies. She rejoined the Commonwealth in 1994, shortly after the first democratic elections, and in November 1999 South Africa both hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Durban and assumed the Chair for the next two years.⁵

South Africa has since 1994 actively partaken in ministerial meetings and the governing bodies of the Commonwealth. Of the 110 foreign countries which have diplomatic missions in South Africa 27 are High Commissions. South Africa has representation in 44 of the 53 Commonwealth countries. The High Commission in Canberra is also responsible for 3 Commonwealth countries.⁶

South Africa attaches great importance to the role of the Commonwealth to promote and protect the values and principles set out in the Commonwealth Charter. The ownership of the Commonwealth and directing the activities of the Commonwealth to truly serve all the member states in achieving our development goals remains of utmost importance to South Africa.⁷

As a member of the Organisation since 1994, South Africa believes that the Commonwealth continues to play an important role in a world where there is increasing pushback against the forces promoting multilateralism as well as international solidarity and cooperation. The Organisation, which represents countries from across the development spectrum should use its unique position and membership from around the globe to continue calling for the strengthening of existing multilateral mechanisms and institutions and transform them to suit current global realities. The Commonwealth provides an opportunity to address issues of common interest, including implementation of development goals and the reform of constitutions of global governance, in particular the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the United Nations.⁸

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Commonwealth must remain at the forefront of the struggle for the advancement and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, gender equality and women empowerment. Through increased solidarity, the 56 members of the Commonwealth will be able to assist each other to

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Department of International Relations and Cooperation, (2005).

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Department of International Relations and Cooperation, (2025).

⁸ Department of International Relations and Cooperation, (2025).

address the challenges we are currently facing. This will ensure that the Commonwealth continues to remain relevant and grow.

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For any comments or feedback, please email sibuthelezi@parliament.gov.za



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