

Commonwealth meet pushes free trade

by Scott Thompson

The final session of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), in Durban, South Africa, on Nov. 15, saw the Commonwealth issue its strongest declaration yet supporting the expansion of free trade, despite the havoc it has wreaked on the economies of its poorer member-countries. Discussion of a common strategy by the 54-nation CHOGM to present to the World Trade Organization summit, which began in Seattle, Washington on Nov. 30, had been placed at the top of the agenda by South African President Thabo Mbeki, who was host to the CHOGM heads of state.

Until the last session, it did not appear that the resolution, originally put forward by Australian Prime Minister John Howard, would succeed, because of opposition from the smaller and poorer states. Only four out of the 54 members of the Commonwealth—Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia—are classified as developed nations, and Mozambique President Joachim Chissano was viewed as speaking for most of the member-countries when he said, “Globalization must have a human face.”

However, the free-trade communiqué, which has become the centerpiece of the biennial CHOGM conference, was agreed upon when Uganda argued for the need to have access to foreign markets.

The communiqué reads:

“We call on all nations to fully implement the Uruguay Round commitments to dismantle barriers to trade for the mutual benefit of all. Moreover, recognizing in particular the significant contribution that enhanced export opportunities can make for reducing poverty, we call for improved market access for the exports of all countries, particularly the developing countries, and the removal of all barriers to the exports of the least developed countries.”

In a bid to attract support for the declaration, Howard announced new and extended aid programs—a paltry \$4 million for one program, and \$1.5 million for another—to “ease the burden of globalization” and to “seek new trade” in the poorer, mainly African, countries.

Thus, the Commonwealth was stampeded into endorsing what LaRouche has called the new imperialism, of the globalized, slave-labor world order. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II weighed in in favor of the “globalization,” or untrammled free-trade policies, that other nations within CHOGM have eschewed for further impoverishing their nations. The Queen, who is the de facto head of the CHOGM club of mostly former

British colonies, said: “Globalization is not only transforming our economies, it is transforming every aspect of our lives.”

‘Deepening poverty’

Her remarks contrasted sharply with outgoing Commonwealth Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria, who said that globalization of the world economy, with trade and investment barriers falling, is a key challenge to Commonwealth leaders. “Globalization may have brought about a phenomenal expansion in world trade, finance, and investment, but for countless millions the stark reality is one of deepening poverty,” he said.

Only at the 11th hour did the Queen’s position in favor of “globalization” carry in the final wording of the 11-page CHOGM communiqué, when the Commonwealth leaders rushed like lemmings to adopt tighter strictures under the new imperialism.

Queen Elizabeth’s favorable view of “globalization” was echoed by New Zealand Foreign Minister Don McKinnon, who, at the opening session on Nov. 12, was named to succeed Anyaoku as Commonwealth Secretary General when Anyaoku retires in March 2000. “The challenge for the 21st century is to ensure that the Commonwealth meets the aspirations of its membership. The role of the Secretary General is to be able to respond to what is determined by the leaders of CHOGM, McKinnon said. “The issues that have been coming before the leaders over the last couple of days are more the economic issues. But that is not to say that good governance is going to disappear. You cannot have a good economic climate without good governance, without transparency, without accountability.”

The CHOGM meeting also suspended the membership of Pakistan, where a bloodless coup on Oct. 12 removed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and installed Gen. Pervez Musharraf. Musharraf said that the decision to suspend Pakistan “is not a very practical one.” “It’s a theoretical stand in which they oppose any type of coup,” he said. “But they haven’t seen the reality, and that whatever happened met the aspirations of the masses.”

Nevertheless, on Nov. 12, New Zealand Foreign Minister McKinnon said that the leaders had endorsed a decision by the eight-member Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which is led by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, to suspend Pakistan. “The job is to lead them back to democratic rule. What we’d like to see from Mr. Musharraf is a timetable,” said McKinnon. “Pakistan does not want to be expelled from the Commonwealth. This is the main lever that we’ve got.”

However, CHOGM rejected a proposal from Secretary Cook that the role of CMAG ought to be expanded to “police democratic practices” among its member-nations in cases other than coups d’état. The CHOGM conference also welcomed Nigeria, which had similarly been suspended after a military coup, and which recently held elections, back into the Commonwealth.