

The Commonwealth Games General Assembly

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Letter from the Chair

Hello Delegates,

My name is João Cardoso, and I am delighted to be your chair for the Commonwealth Games at this year's WAMUNC! I have staffed this conference in some capacity, either as a chair, crisis director, or staffer, for the last three years, and I am excited to chair this committee for my final WAMUNC. I am currently a senior here at the George Washington University, studying international affairs with a concentration in Latin America and minors in socio-cultural anthropology and history. I am originally from São Paulo in Brazil, and have been active in Model UN since my freshman year of high school, and, after 24 total conferences up to this point, this WAMUNC will officially be my last conference. Outside of Model UN, I am involved with other student organizations, most notably the Brazilian Students Association (GW BRASA), and I also work as a tour guide for the undergraduate admissions office (so if anyone ever takes a tour of GW, I might be your guide). In my free time, I enjoy watching films, playing games with friends, and reading. If you have any questions about either MUN or this committee, please feel free to email me at jcardoso@gwu.edu. I look forward to seeing everyone in March!

Introduction to the Commonwealth Games

The Commonwealth Games are an international cross-sporting event held every four years. Athletes represent their own countries, which are made up of the members of the Commonwealth of Nations. The Commonwealth of Nations is an international organization of 56 member states, the vast majority of whom are former members of the British Empire.¹ The Commonwealth of Nations mainly focuses on developing diplomatic relations between its member states, promoting democracy, human rights, good governance, and economic growth.² Unlike other international organizations, the Commonwealth does not have the power to affect policies within countries. The Commonwealth of Nations, in practice, acts more as a diplomatic forum for its member states, in order to promote cooperation between them.

The head of the Commonwealth organization is the monarch of the United Kingdom, in this case, King Charles the Third. This role is largely ceremonial though, and the King has relatively little policy making power. King Charles will also be the last head of the Commonwealth of Nations to inherit the role, and future leaders will be chosen by the member states. For more day to day and policy related matters, a secretariat leads the Commonwealth, led by an appointed secretary general. The secretariat is the overarching executive branch of the Commonwealth. The member states of the Commonwealth of Nations initially consisted of territories of the British empire, but this changed as independence and decolonization grew.³ Now, most of the member states of the Commonwealth are independent nation's (where the

¹ "Commonwealth Games Federation." *Commonwealth Sport*. Accessed December 12, 2024. <https://www.commonwealthsport.com/cgf>.

² Ibid

³"Commonwealth Association of States." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Last modified October 11, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Commonwealth-association-of-states>.

British monarch is still ceremonially, but not practically, the head of state), although there are also a handful of British territories in the Commonwealth as well.⁴

The Commonwealth Games are a way to strengthen cultural and diplomatic ties between the member states of the commonwealth. Initially, the Commonwealth games were called the Empire Games, and featured athletes from various territories of the British empire.⁵ Over the past few decades, the games have attempted to move away from their colonial heritage, although the association still remains in the eyes of many. In terms of how functionality, the games operate with a very similar structure to the olympics: countries send athletes to compete in various sports (both individual and team sports), the games begin with an opening ceremony and end with a closing ceremony organized by the host city, and the host city alternates every four years.⁶ While the Commonwealth games are much smaller in scope and scale than the olympics (with 72 participating countries and 6,500 athletes),⁷ they still represent a significant challenge, as well as a mark of prestige, for any host city/ country.

Topic A: Shifting the commonwealth games image away from colonialism and towards diversity

Colonial Critiques of the Commonwealth Games:

As previously mentioned, the history of the Commonwealth organization and the commonwealth games are intrinsically linked with the history of the British Empire and European colonialism. While the messaging behind the games has shifted to emphasize values of

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Beaumont, Chris. "The Commonwealth Games Faces Battle to Survive." *The Guardian*, December 4, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/dec/04/commonwealth-games-battle-to-survive>.

⁶ "Commonwealth Games." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Last modified December 6, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/sports/Commonwealth-Games>.

⁷ "Commonwealth Games 2022 Medal Table." *The Guardian*, August 4, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/ng-interactive/2022/aug/04/commonwealth-games-medal-table-2022>.

democracy and diplomatic cooperation, the fact that the participating countries are all former members of the British empire makes the colonial legacy inherently impossible to separate from the games as an institution and as a tradition.

Even though the Commonwealth games are not an explicitly political event, it has been impacted by and reflective of world politics. Participation in the games has long been a political act. During the 1970s and 1980s, many nations boycotted the games due to continued diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom and Apartheid South Africa, particularly by former British colonies in Africa.⁸ In recent years, there has been growing opposition to the Commonwealth games from former parts of the British empire, with many commentators seeing the games as a way of celebrating a colonial past rather than an independent present.⁹ This growth in opposition to the games has coincided with a recent wave of referendums for nations in the commonwealth to abandon the British monarchy, and become nominally independent republics. For example, in 2024, Jamaicans voted on a referendum to remove King Charles as the (ceremonial) head of state, replacing him with a new presidential system.¹⁰ Other countries, especially those in the Caribbean, have also moved in this direction, including Barbados and the Bahamas.¹¹ While not every country in the Commonwealth of nations recognized King Charles as the head of state (most notably India), this growing trend indicates a desire for countries to distance themselves from the remaining vestiges of colonialism, and that extends to the Commonwealth Games as well.

⁸"Commonwealth Games." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Last modified December 6, 2023.

<https://www.britannica.com/sports/Commonwealth-Games>.

⁹Van der Westhuyzen, Jacques. "Opinion: Time Has Come to Scrap Slimmed-Down Commonwealth Games." *The Citizen*, December 4, 2023.

<https://www.citizen.co.za/sport/opinion-time-has-come-to-scrap-slimmed-down-commonwealth-games/>.

¹⁰Fleary, Sinai. "Jamaica Prepares to Cut Ties with the British Monarchy Through Historic Bill." *The Voice*, December 5, 2024.

<https://www.voice-online.co.uk/news/world-news/2024/12/05/jamaica-prepares-to-cut-ties-with-the-british-monarchy-through-historic-bill/>.

¹¹Ibid

Another critique of the games, especially the upcoming 2026 edition, are the sports that are offered. Between the 2022 and the upcoming 2026 edition of the games, 9 sports were cut, including rugby, hockey, and cricket.¹² Many of the sports that were cut are popular among “non-western” members of the Commonwealth of Nations, disadvantaged countries such as South Africa where Rugby is popular and India where cricket and hockey are both popular. Many of the sports that do remain, such as cycling and swimming, are more popular in wealthier countries such as the UK and Australia, where athletes can afford the necessary equipment and venues to practice. While the decision to cut those particular sports was described as a financial decision rather than a cultural one, it still disadvantages the developing nations within the Commonwealth.

Some of the countries where support for the Games continues to be strong includes Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK. While Australia ultimately decided to not host the 2026 edition, the games themselves are still fairly beloved, and Australia is the top medal winner of any country.¹³ While no country explicitly supports emphasizing the colonial history of the Commonwealth games and the Commonwealth of Nations, these countries all still recognize King Charles as the head of state, and criticism towards the UK government is much smaller. In contrast to the support for the games by western countries, many of the states in the Caribbean are some of the most critical towards the UK government and the Commonwealth organization as a whole. British colonization was especially brutal in the Caribbean, and much of the current population of the British Caribbean is descended from slaves imported by the British. It is also in the Caribbean where recent efforts to remove the British monarch as head of state has been

¹² Van der Westhuyzen, Jacques. "Opinion: Time Has Come to Scrap Slimmed-Down Commonwealth Games." *The Citizen*, December 4, 2023.

<https://www.citizen.co.za/sport/opinion-time-has-come-to-scrap-slimmed-down-commonwealth-games/>.

¹³ "All-Time Commonwealth Games Medal Table." *Topend Sports*. Accessed December 8th, 2024.

<https://www.topendsports.com/events/commonwealth-games/medals/table-all-time.htm>.

gaining the most momentum and support. Most of the English speaking Caribbean would fall in this block, with the most significant countries being Bahamas, Barbados, Guayana, and Jamaica.

Some of the more developing countries participating in the Commonwealth Games are the most affected by the decision to alter which events are offered. In South Asia, Cricket is an incredibly popular sport, and countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan have very strong cricket teams (the same also applies to Hockey). Similarly, Rugby is very popular in South Africa, and the South African Rugby team is considered one of the best in the world. These countries might focus more of their efforts in trying to find ways to ensure the inclusion of these sports. While Australia and New Zealand have significant numbers of medals in other sports (including ones which are slated for inclusion), they also excel in Rugby, and might be inclined to support this block.

Topic B: Equitable infrastructure development for host countries

Given that in the 95 years since the first Commonwealth Games in 1930, only 3 non-western countries have ever hosted the games, perpetuating the Commonwealth Games' reputation as a holdover of colonialism. One of the main reasons for this is the cost. Similar to the Olympics and the World Cup, the Commonwealth Games has not only been historically expensive to run but has become increasingly more expensive. Before Australia dropped out of the 2026 Commonwealth Games, they estimated the cost of the event to be over 4.5 billion dollars.¹⁴ Of the commonwealth nations, 6 are developed Western economies and 50 are developing nations. Furthermore, 33 of these nations have a population of less than 1.5 million

¹⁴ AP News. "2026 Commonwealth Games Cancellation in Melbourne." *AP News*, January 13, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/2026-commonwealth-games-cancellation-melbourne-49139ec906f5cfd06d4a6beaab669ea1>.

people.¹⁵ With Australia withdrawing its 2026 Commonwealth Games bid in 2023, it is clear that there is not enough incentive to host the event since the cost of infrastructure investments is far too high.

The cost of hosting the Commonwealth Games comes not only from event infrastructure development but also from the increased burden of tourism for spectators. In 2006 the city of Melbourne invested 39 million dollars in transportation infrastructure alone, which is a price tag that is often too high for different hosting nations.¹⁶ Furthermore, tourism brings stress to local waste management and public water systems. Given that many fast-growing cities in developing countries already struggle to provide access to clean drinking water and waste management systems, these cities' municipal waste and water systems would be more overburdened than they already are.¹⁷

While hosting the Commonwealth Games is expensive, cities often have plenty of incentives to host. Since 2002, the host city of each Commonwealth Games saw a GDP growth of between almost 1 to nearly 1.5 billion USD within the region where the event was hosted. Furthermore, the event serves as an opportunity for the host nation's culture to reach over a billion people, bolstering the cultural export of the nation. Due to the high viewership of the event, the host city benefits from a strong increase in tourism as each host city has seen a roughly 25% increase in tourism over the following three years after hosting.¹⁸ Given the increase in regional GDP and the boost to the tourism industry, hosting the Commonwealth Games is

¹⁵ Commonwealth Secretariat. "Our Member Countries." The Commonwealth, accessed January 14, 2025. <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries>.

¹⁶ State of Victoria. *Commonwealth Games 2026 Business Case (Redacted)*. August 2023. <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/CommonwealthGames2026BusinessCaseRedacted.pdf>.

¹⁷ UN-Water. "Water and Urbanization." *UN-Water*, accessed January 14, 2025. <https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/water-and-urbanization#:~:text=Fast%20growing%20towns%20and%20cities,managed%20water%20and%20sanitation%20services>.

¹⁸ Inside the Games. *CG Value Framework Report*. 2023. <https://media.insidethegames.biz/media/file/177742/CG+Value+Framework+Report.pdf>.

usually well worth the investment made by the host city and country. Furthermore, it is beneficial for the Commonwealth Games to be hosted in developing countries and non-western nations because it promotes a more inclusive image of the competition, which would eradicate the poor image of the Commonwealth Games.

Hosting the Commonwealth Games provides an incentive for countries to build or update infrastructure. Often, private interests see the Commonwealth Games as an opportunity to invest in infrastructure. For example, for the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games, local universities and the Lawn Tennis Association came together to invest in hosting venues.¹⁹ Given the potential for outside investment, many steps could be taken by the Commonwealth Games General Assembly to negotiate investments from outside groups. Furthermore, the Commonwealth Games Federation has historically provided smaller grants to help build developing nations' access to training facilities.²⁰ However, the Commonwealth Games Federation has not yet expanded the grant program to assist host cities in any form despite countries requesting for them to do so.

The issue of the high cost of hosting the Commonwealth Games is by no means new. The Commonwealth Games General Assembly, however, has never implemented any cost-sharing measures. The furthest their assistance with financing the events goes is through creating a pricing estimate for the event. Therefore, the Commonwealth Games General Assembly needs to solve the issue of funding equitable infrastructure development not only to expand the list of host countries, diminishing the colonial image of the games, but also to allow the many developing

¹⁹ Inside the Games. *CG Value Framework Report*. 2023.
<https://media.insidethegames.biz/media/file/177742/CG+Value+Framework+Report.pdf>.

²⁰ Commonwealth Sport. "Grants." *Commonwealth Sport*, accessed January 14, 2025.
<https://www.commonwealthsport.com/community/grants#:~:text=The%20Game%20Changers%20grants%20are,social%20impact%20component%20to%20them>.

nations within the commonwealth to benefit from the often long-lasting economic benefits associated with hosting the Commonwealth Games.

Questions to Consider

This committee will have the difficult task of finding a way to shift the perception of the Commonwealth games away from a celebration of British colonialism into something in line with modern ethics. Doing so is important not just for the continued survival of the Commonwealth games, but also for the continued relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations as an international institution. Below are several questions and pathways that should guide you while you debate and come up with solutions and policies throughout the committee.

- *“How can we guarantee that the sports chosen for this edition of the Commonwealth Games equitably reflect the preferences of participating countries?”*

As it currently stands, the selection of sports represented a disadvantage to the developing nations of the Commonwealth. If the committee can find a way to work around the financial limitations of hosting certain games, it would make developing countries feel less alienated from the games and the Commonwealth organization.

- *“How should the messaging of the Commonwealth games shift to de-emphasize the colonial history of the UK?”*

The Commonwealth games has been slowly shifting its branding in order to de-emphasize the United Kingdom and the British empire. For example, if one takes a look at past logos, one sees that between 1974 and 1998, all the logos featured the colours of the Union Jack, and before 1974, crowns and other symbols of the British monarchy featured prominently.²¹

²¹ "Commonwealth Games." *Commonwealth Sport*. Accessed December 8th, 2024. <https://www.commonwealthsport.com/commonwealth-games>.

Despite this, it is impossible to separate the simple fact that the participating members of the Commonwealth Games are all former British colonies. Expanding eligible members is one way of separating this association, but this then undermines the very identity of the games themselves. Finding ways to further emphasize the host city in the branding and messaging can also aid in this (although considering that the upcoming edition of the games is hosted by the UK, this could be counterproductive).

- *“Should the Commonwealth Games even continue as a tradition and institution? What about the Commonwealth of Nations as a whole?”*

There are many voices around the Commonwealth that argue that it is time for the games as a tradition to end, and at the same time, there are also many voices throughout the Commonwealth that strongly disagree with that opinion. The amount of critique towards the games is definitely not uniform; critiques tend to be more common in more developing parts of the Commonwealth that have less cultural ties to the UK, such as in South Africa and India, than in places that maintain strong ties to the UK, such as in Australia. In attempting to reform the games away from its colonial image, the committee must decide whether it is even worth keeping the Commonwealth games around at all.

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