**Speech to the Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh**

**by Australian High Commissioner Greg Wilcock**

**Commonwealth Day, 11 March 2013**

I am pleased to be here today to represent Australia as Commonwealth Chair-in-Office and celebrate our shared commitment to Commonwealth values.

The Commonwealth is diverse and vital. It brings together two billion people in over 50 countries, spanning all continents and major religions. And together we can make a real difference in addressing contemporary challenges.

At the 2011 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Perth, we showed that we want to keep the Commonwealth a dynamic organisation relevant to the needs of our time. We agreed on ambitious reforms.

Now, as Chair-in-office, a key priority for Australia has been to deliver on the leaders’ agreement in Perth: to promote, to uphold, to preserve and to defend our Commonwealth values.

**Charter of the Commonwealth**

Agreement in Perth to have a “Charter of the Commonwealth”, which includes respect for human rights and justice, was a significant achievement. The Commonwealth has never before had a single consolidated document that embodies our shared values.

The Charter was developed through a broad consultative process. Discussions in Commonwealth countries drew upon the experience and insights of civil society, officials and ministers.

Commonwealth Foreign Ministers also played an important role, giving the Charter their stamp of approval in September 2012 before it was formally adopted by Leaders last December.

As Chair-in-Office, Australia was proud to lead this process. Adoption of the Charter was an important opportunity for the Commonwealth to stand tall. And it could not have been achieved without the strong contribution of Bangladesh and its friends in South Asia.

The Charter of the Commonwealth will help our citizens, including our younger generation, understand what the Commonwealth stands for. It brings together the values and aspirations which unite the Commonwealth – democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It emphasises the importance of sustainable development and youth. And it recognises the special needs of small and vulnerable states.

At the Commonwealth Secretariat’s reception for Commonwealth Day today, 11 March, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II will sign a copy of the Charter. The Secretariat has encouraged all Commonwealth Heads of Government to table the Charter in their respective Parliaments.

I am pleased to report that Australian Prime Minister Gillard plans to table the Charter in the Australian Parliament this month.

*Eminent Persons Group*

The Charter was just one of 106 recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) in their 2011 report ‘A Commonwealth of the People: Time for Urgent Reform’.

The establishment of the EPG itself was an expression of the Commonwealth at work – it brought together a group of exceptional, experienced and varied representatives.

All EPG recommendations have now been considered by the membership.  Around 80 recommendations were agreed in full or with comments.  Australia looks forward to working with the Commonwealth Secretariat on implementation.

**A strengthened CMAG**

The Perth Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting also resulted in the Commonwealth’s decision to strengthen the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group – of which Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister, Dr Dipu Moni, is the current chair.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Groups’s new mandate enables it to play a more active role in strengthening democracy averting serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth values.

**Conclusion**

Australia looks forward to working with our Commonwealth partners to promote the Charter. Efforts to reform and strengthen the Commonwealth will continue. We know what these values mean to the lives of the millions of citizens that make up the Commonwealth.

Thank you.