

SPEECH BY HONOURABLE RANIL WICKREMASINGHE

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Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Assistant Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat, Honourable Ministers, Your Excellencies, Members of Parliament and Friends.

When the Young Leaders of the Commonwealth met in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, they recommended that the meeting of Young Leaders be held every two years preceeding the meeting of the Heads of Governments. So we are assembled here, for the second time to continue the dialogue among the Young Leaders of the Commonwealth, young politicians, young trade union leaders and young professionals. It is an occasion when representatives from countries which have shared a common experience meet together to discuss common problems. We represent the developing nations and the developed nations. We represent Asia, Africa, Europe, America and Australasia. We represent all races and religions. It is indeed a unique occasion for what we have in common amongst us is not only a historical experience but also our age.

I am proud that Sri Lanka was chosen as the venue for the Second Meeting. In a sense it is an appropriate venue, for the Government of Sri Lanka is committed to the participation of the youth in the decision making process of this country and we are transforming this commitment into reality. At every level of the decision making process of government, we see young people. If I take the Parliament of Sri Lanka as an example there are 27 members of Parliament in the Government Parliamentary Group who fall into the category of Young Leaders, and 10 of them hold office as Cabinet Ministers, Ministers not of Cabinet rank and Deputy Ministers.

We remember a time in Sri Lanka when youth were alienated from society and had no confidence in the process of administration. To overcome this crisis His Excellency the President, J.R. Jayawardene proposed the policy of youth representation. We seek to guarantee to the youth, partnership in the development of the country, by direct representation in policy making and in its implementation. It is only this process which will restore the confidence of the youth in the government, for then they will be partners in shaping the future society that they would live in.

Our aim is to build a society which will fulfil the aspirations of the youth. A modern society, a technologically advanced society, an open society, free from inequality, and who can understand this aspirations better than the youth themselves?

On the one hand development both economic and social cannot be achieved overnight, on the other, youth are impatient for the results. How do we face this problem? It is only by making youth partners in development that we can expect them to understand the problems, to appreciate the progress, and to defend and safeguard the new society that is being created. We see no alternative to this path. To exclude youth from the process of nation building is to invite instability and chaos. Further, there are no valid reasons, no valid arguments for shutting out the views of the younger people. We must remember that most of us here today, are adherents of religious doctrines that were preached by young people.

I must thank the Commonwealth Youth Programme for taking the initiative in arranging these meetings of young leaders and I hope there will be more such meetings in the future, for this Programme seeks to enhance the role that is played by young leaders in the Commonwealth countries.

And finally on behalf of the government of Sri Lanka, on behalf of the young people of Sri Lanka and I may say the people of Sri Lanka, since all of us are young at heart, I welcome all the delegates to our country.