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Wasting our time up a diplomatic dead end

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THE important diplomatic question of the month is not whether Zimbabwe will come back into the Commonwealth, but why on earth Australia does not get out.

Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard, accompanied by a substantial entourage, has just spent nearly a week in Abuja that's Abuja, Nigeria for the biennial meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government. This meeting, known by the unattractive acronym CHOGM, is at the heart of what is, by any measure, the most useless international institution to which any senior Australian political leader must commit time and energy.

And what was the outcome of those long days on the road? Little more than a bitter debate which left the group deeply divided about its own membership criteria and whether Zimbabwe should be there.

You probably didn't read the communique issued at the end of the Abuja meeting. I'm not surprised. Seventy-two turgid paragraphs of motherhood statements "Heads of government appreciated the need for constructive dialogue and co-operation to achieve sustainable development" and meaningless diplomatic compromise "Heads of government of those member countries that have ratified the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court urged other states, which have not yet done so, to accede." I know it's unfair to quote Commonwealth communiqués as though they were actually intended to mean something. But hours of diplomatic time were expended to produce these words, even those that were simply cut and pasted from the last effort. The heads of government also got together and produced something called the Aso Rock Declaration, which sounds much more interesting than it turns out to be. This lengthy statement on "Development and Democracy: Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" rated not a mention I can find in any Australian newspaper. (The Aso Rock Declaration draws on the work of the "landmark declarations in Singapore, Harare and Fancourt", if that helps you.)

The New Zealand secretary-general of this hapless organisation, Don McKinnon, made a valiant attempt to claim that the meeting would have "a key role in the area of trade". But not even he sounded convinced.

Asked how the outcome squared with his pre-meeting hope that the gathering would contribute to resolution of global trade problems, Howard was able to declare only that it was "broadly consistent with the things I have been saying".

So what was Australia doing there? Given its vigorous criticisms of most multilateral organisations, the Howard Government has been remarkably gentle with the Commonwealth, an organisation of legendary lethargy and waste. One reason, no doubt, is the historical links to Britain and its institutions. But then I noticed that one of the most vehement critics of Howard's strong line on Zimbabwe was President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique. If, like me, you can't remember the time Mozambique had any constitutional connection to Britain or its empire, your memory does not fail you. (It was admitted in 1995 because many of its neighbours were members.)

Membership of the Commonwealth, it is sometimes claimed, is a price we pay for good relations with a wide variety of different countries and regions with whom we would not naturally come into contact. It is assumed that this might come in handy when Australia is standing for appointment to important international posts. But, in fact, Commonwealth membership has led this time at any rate to little more than a deepening rift between Australia and the southern African members. Does that matter? Not much probably, but neither is it much of a return on membership dues.

Perhaps spending a few days a year in a remote corner of the world is a small enough sacrifice for any Australian prime minister to pay for those garlands of gold, silver and bronze medals weighing down our athletes at the Commonwealth Games. But that argument is wearing thin. Even the most one-eyed Australian sporting fans recognise cheap success when they see it.

The main reason we are still a member, of course, is that the Commonwealth doesn't matter. No one cares enough. It's hard to get fussed about it. It would require more effort to walk away than to let things run on.

The Commonwealth is a fine example of one of the immutable rules of international organisations, which is that it is a good deal easier to start them up than to finish them off. They hardly ever go away. The Warsaw Pact, admittedly, has bitten the dust, but its principal adversary, NATO, has simply redefined its objectives and marched off with sprightly steps in a new direction.

In a polite and tentative sort of way, successive Australian prime ministers have gone into Commonwealth meetings urging change and reform. But the problem is not format, it is function. It is the impossibility of finding anything much, short of platitudes, on which such a diverse group can agree, or any matters of real substance on which they need to work.

There is a serious issue in all this. Australian prime ministers have limited time and energy and the country's bureaucratic resources are finite. The objectives of encouraging a broad spread of Australian diplomacy around the world and helping to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law are excellent. But they can be met in other, more effective, ways.

It is time we abandoned the profitless project of trying to reform the Commonwealth from within. Otherwise, CHOGMs in Malta and Uganda lurk in the future for Australian prime ministers. At least we know what will be in the communiqués.