The Activities of the CNCDP: A preliminary assessment

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1. The Discoveries Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries (Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses - CNCDP) was created at the end of 1986 (Decree-Law No. 391, 22 November 1986). After initially operating with an apparent lack of any really clear definition (Programme, 1988), it underwent a number of “profound changes in its structure and working methods” in September 1988 (Plan, 9; Cruz, 2001, 20). Vasco Graça Moura was then appointed Commissioner-General and, in April of the following year, he was also appointed coordinator of the Executive Committee, remaining in both positions until the end of 1995. António Manuel Hespanha, who succeeded him, was appointed Commissioner-General on 28 November of that same year, later being replaced by Joaquim Romero Magalhães, who was appointed in February 1999 and remained in this position until the Discoveries Commission was abolished at the end of 2002.

The Discoveries Commission was composed of a president, a commissioner-general and a group of voting members representing the country in as many different ways as possible. In fact, the Discoveries Commission, whose first president was Commander E. H. Serra Brandão, and thereafter the Prime Minister, had the following composition: one representative of each of the members of government responsible for the areas of National Defence, Finance, Planning and Territorial Administration, Foreign Affairs, Education, the Sea, Youth and Culture; one representative of each of the Regional Governments of the Azores and Madeira; as well as one representative of the Governor of Macau. Also represented on the Commission were the National Association of Portuguese Municipalities, the Portuguese Episcopal Conference, the Commissariat for the 1998 Lisbon International Exposition (EXPO 98), the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Council of the Vice-Chancellors of Portuguese Universities, the Coordinating Council of the Higher Polytechnic Institutes, all the official academies (Sciences, History, Navy, Fine Arts, the Geographical Society and the Portuguese Military History Commission) and the Portuguese Commissar for the 1992 Seville Universal Exposition (Graça Moura). The possibility also remained open for the introduction of other institutions or personalities that were considered useful, some of whom did in fact become members of the Executive Committee. At the time of the last Commissioner-General, its members numbered 34 individuals (Moura, 1994, 206; Hespanha, 1999, 164; Magalhães, 2002, 126).

At the head of the organisational structure was an Executive Committee, dependent on the president of the Discoveries Commission, which was coordinated by the Commissioner-General. This committee was assisted by a Scientific Council, created in 1988, “which was responsible for issuing opinions on matters of a historical and scientific nature” (Moura, 1994, 209; Programme, 25 and others; Cruz, 2001, 20). The presidents of this council were Luís de Albuquerque (Order 36/88, of 2 December), Luís Adão da Fonseca, Joaquim Romero Magalhães and Luís A. de Oliveira Ramos. An Interdepartmental Council coordinated the various actions undertaken by the different government departments (Plan, 9) and a group of enthusiastic and committed men and women comprised the operational structure, providing an excellent example of productive team work (Programme, 68; Hespanha, 1999, 27). Responsibility for organising the commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the Portuguese Discoveries at primary and secondary schools was entrusted to an autonomous, devoted and dynamic body, the Working Group of the Ministry of Education for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries, a title that replaced what had started out as a commission and unfortunately bore an equivocal formal similarity with the Discoveries Commission. The activities of this Working Group were integrated into the programme drawn up by the CNCDP (Cruz, 2001, 21).