



Lessons from Lusaka: leaders must make use of the Commonwealth

The Lusaka Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting took place 30 years ago this week. Paving the way for Rhodesian independence, it was a defining moment in the Commonwealth's life and a pivotal turning point in the history of southern Africa. Two leaders present at that meeting have spoken to the Royal Commonwealth Society. Former Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser and former Zambian President, Dr Kenneth Kaunda told us what lessons today's leaders can learn from Lusaka.

Interview with Rt. Hon. Malcolm Fraser

The Lusaka CHOGM was a critical moment in the life of the Commonwealth. There was the potential that differing views on what should be done in Rhodesia could well blow the Commonwealth apart. There was no chance of a settlement in Rhodesia unless we came up with something that all the parties agreed to, including Britain and Margaret Thatcher.

There were some obviously difficult moments in Lusaka. It wasn't easy to get leaders to agree, but after conversations at the retreat, we brokered an agreement that led to the Lancaster House talks and the full independence of what became Zimbabwe.

The Lusaka conference was absolutely critical in leading to this result. It showed that the Commonwealth could achieve things that many other organisations could not.

It was a very important occasion, although the role that the Commonwealth later played in relation to apartheid was an even more significant one.

Critical to the success of both was Sonny Ramphal, then Commonwealth Secretary General. He was an activist. He annoyed some Heads of Government who didn't want an activist or somebody who could get up and very forcibly put forward points of view. But I actually believe that Sonny Ramphal is the sort of Secretary-General that the Commonwealth ought to have. Since his time, Secretaries-General have been much quieter.

I believe that if Sonny Ramphal had been Secretary-General in more recent times, the Commonwealth would have been far, far more active in trying to keep Robert Mugabe on the straight and narrow. There was a role there that the Commonwealth did not fulfil.

Zimbabwe is not only one of the greatest successes of the Commonwealth – in terms of what happened in 1979 – but also one of its greatest failures. It's a great tragedy that the Commonwealth did not marshal its resources early enough or adequately enough on Zimbabwe. I still believe that it could have been

extraordinarily influential, but it wasn't going to happen without an activist Secretary-General. The Commonwealth could have made it extremely difficult for President Mbeki to stand up and support Mugabe. The Commonwealth should have found a way around this.

The developmental programmes that the Commonwealth runs are relatively small but useful and productive. So too is the role that it plays in terms of small states. All of these are useful but they are very low-key.

I'd like to see the Commonwealth play a more vigorous role in relation to countries like Pakistan, Fiji and Sri Lanka.

I really do believe that the Commonwealth should not be a shy and retiring organisation. The Secretary-General should be an activist and I wish that heads of government would be prepared to pick somebody who would follow Sonny Ramphal's example.

Part of it is a question of leadership and advocacy of the Secretary-General, but it's also a question of the quality and character of the Heads of Governments of the day. The fact that the Commonwealth has not played a more high profile role reflects the view of some governments. For example, Margaret Thatcher didn't want somebody who would push; she didn't like being pushed on South Africa. She wanted to make sure that that wouldn't go on happening.

If you have a Secretary-General who can argue strongly and moderately, based in fact, that we ought to do something about a situation and he gives some options of what can be done, then it makes it much harder for Commonwealth countries to stand aside and say 'well, let's do nothing'.

I think it's a great pity that CHOGM retreats have been cut down in time. Spending a couple of days getting to know your counterparts in many other countries was useful. I know we had problems in my time with Fiji. But if something had been brought to my attention where normal diplomacy had not worked, I would be able to pick up the phone to Ratu Mara and, within a few minutes, that was the end of it. It would be the end of it because he and I had got to know each other, trust each other and knew that we could deal with each other. One of the great benefits of the Commonwealth is the time you spend in those retreats getting to know a range of people in a way that you don't in other international organisations. At the UN, for example, people go to New York in September, make their speeches and have a few bilateral meetings for half an hour with other relevant heads of government who might be there at the time, and then head out again. That's not like sitting down for a couple of days without officials and getting to know other Heads of Governments and Heads of State. This is the sort of relationship that is unique to members of the Commonwealth.

You've got to ask yourself perhaps the most important question: if the Commonwealth is to survive as an effective organisation, what do you want it to do? Do you want it to be just there to do routine, humdrum things and never annoy anyone, never resolve disputes? Or do you want it to be an active player?

You could ask yourself the same question about the UN. If you want somebody who's never going to offend any government, who will never take the lead, try to get members to do this or that, or try and guide and cajole the Security Council; if you had somebody who was quiescent, then the UN would fall into disrepute. In many ways this is analogous to the Commonwealth.

The fact remains that an enormous amount depends on the attitudes of current leaders of the more important countries in the association. If the Commonwealth has not achieved much, it's because the major members of the Commonwealth have not put enough effort in to make sure that it does achieve a lot.

If the UK were to take the lead in making the Commonwealth a useful and effective organisation...Through the Commonwealth, Britain can have an influence in the world in a way that it could not by itself. In fact, this might be the Commonwealth's best hope.

Interview with Dr. Kenneth D. Kaunda

The CHOGM I hosted in 1979 in Lusaka showed clearly that we in the Commonwealth knew where we came from, knew where we were currently, and could foresee clearly what the future of the Commonwealth was to be.

The great achievement of the Lusaka CHOGM was persuading Margaret Thatcher to call the Lancaster House conference on Zimbabwe. Of all the Commonwealth has done, this alone was a very important achievement and it was the most important result of this wonderful conference.

I spoke to President Mugabe and the late Joshua Nkomo after the conference. They did not think Margaret Thatcher was serious about the CHOGM's decision to call a summit on Zimbabwe in London. I knew she was serious, and called my colleagues Julius Nyrere of Tanzania and the President of Mozambique. I told them what Mugabe and Nkomo had told me and together we persuaded them to change their minds and go to London. This was important and shows how the decisions in Lusaka were taken very seriously indeed.

This summit was vital for Rhodesia's future. I think that the summit not only displayed its commitment to matters of peace and justice, but something practical was achieved. Not just thinking or talking about it.

When you think of the settlers who had declared the Universal Declaration of Independence in 1965, they intended to turn Rhodesia into another South Africa. Fortunately, our unity of purpose and approach made them realise that there was no other option but to yield to the pressure from the majority of the people of our sister republics.

Now the Commonwealth should be trying to engage more proactively with the Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe. Quite a number of leaders have been involved in Zimbabwe quietly already, and it has had some good results.

I was not expecting Zimbabwe to withdraw from the Commonwealth when it did. But that was done. Mistakes have been made, and I would welcome Zimbabwe back into the Commonwealth family when she is ready. The road to recovery which we are witnessing now shows how right I am when I say she belongs to the Commonwealth.

As Commonwealth Heads of Government, we took the institution very seriously. Many of us from that generation gained independence via many trips to prison, but in the end we succeeded. From that, we can see a lot needs to be done to show that even though we are independent we can work together. We need to strengthen the organisation because it will help the human race in many different ways. It can have a great impact as we saw at Lusaka.

But to do this the Commonwealth must raise its profile. The Commonwealth could use people who have retired from active politics as ambassadors, as people to go to universities and encourage students to read up on the Commonwealth's history and help us to build on the thoughts of the Commonwealth's founding fathers and mothers.

Let's get young people in the Commonwealth to become active in their fields of human endeavour. They can help us provoke our thinking on important subjects and help us rebuild the Commonwealth in their vision.

Biographies

Rt. Hon. Malcolm Fraser

Rt. Hon. Malcolm Fraser was Australia's 22nd Prime Minister. He began his term as Prime Minister in 1975, as a caretaker after the Governor-General dismissed Gough Whitlam's Labor government. The Fraser Coalition government was returned with the largest landslide of any federal election a month later, and he remained in office until 1983.

Mr. Fraser had an important influence on the changing relations of countries within the Commonwealth, and on shaping Australia's relations with Asia. He lives, aged 79, in Australia.

Dr Kenneth D. Kaunda

Dr Kenneth D. Kaunda was Zambia's founding President and led his country through 27 years of one-party rule. Dr Kaunda came to power in 1964, on the crest of the wave of African liberation movements. He left office in 1991 with the advent of multi-party elections, which his United National Independence Party lost to the Movement for Multiparty Democracy.

Dr. Kaunda played a crucial role in southern Africa's liberation struggle, famously dancing with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979 at the end of a meeting with Commonwealth leaders that led to the independence of Zimbabwe. He lives, aged 85, in Zambia.