

Common what?

EMERGING FINDINGS OF THE
COMMONWEALTH CONVERSATION



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is a summary of the emerging findings of the Commonwealth Conversation, a public consultation launched in July 2009 by the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS).

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The views expressed in this report are those of this team and do not necessarily reflect those of the Trustees or Members of the RCS, or of the FCO.








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PHOTO CREDITS

All of the images featured in this report are previous winners of the Commonwealth Photographic Awards. With thanks to the Commonwealth Press Union and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

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- Page 21: Commonwealth Photographic Awards 2004: Australasia and Pacific, Highly Commended. Pupils at school in the Soloman Islands. Phil Reid / © Commonwealth Photographic Awards
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the emerging findings of the Commonwealth Conversation, a global public consultation on the future of the Commonwealth launched in July 2009. Using a variety of online and offline methods to engage tens of thousands of people around the world, the Conversation presents a serious wake-up call to anyone eager to see the Commonwealth thrive in the 21st century.

The Commonwealth Conversation has unearthed an association that seems to be loved by too few, too often for the wrong reasons. Policymakers have asked what role the association has in today's world; Commonwealth insiders seem frustrated that it isn't taken seriously enough; and members of the public are largely unaware of what the Commonwealth is or does. These findings suggest that rebuilding the Commonwealth's **profile** will require a renewed focus on principles, priorities and people.

Principles. There is widespread public confusion about what the Commonwealth stands for today. Articulating a set of values that go beyond other commitments made by member states, giving the Secretariat a stronger voice in promoting those values, and strengthening the role of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group in protecting them are seen to be critical to rebuilding the Commonwealth's profile.

Priorities. While the Commonwealth does good work in many areas, there are consistent calls for it to focus on where it can add value. Even in the most frequently suggested areas - democracy and good governance, education, and climate change - the challenge will be to determine how the Commonwealth can deploy its unique characteristics most effectively, whether as a forum for dialogue, an exchange for best practice, or as a collective political voice.

People. The Commonwealth's network of civil society organisations is unparalleled. Yet, if these organisations are to flourish in the 21st century, they too will need to be more innovative, more coordinated and more effective at engaging a younger generation.

It seems that member states, official institutions and civil society all share an urgent responsibility for revitalising the Commonwealth. The association's sixtieth birthday and the CHOGM to be held in Trinidad and Tobago offer the perfect opportunity to shape the future of the Commonwealth. We urge readers to seize it or risk watching the Commonwealth fade into irrelevance.

This report is aimed at stimulating further discussion. Views and reactions can be contributed to the Conversation by visiting www.thecommonwealthconversation.org.

I. INTRODUCTION

The title of this report, ‘Common what?’, recalls remarks made independently by two people we talked to during the course of the Commonwealth Conversation. One was a journalist in South Africa and the other a Jamaican businesswoman based in the UK. Both told us that, if we were to ask their friends and colleagues about how relevant the Commonwealth is to them, this is how they would react.

Four months into the largest-ever public consultation on the Commonwealth, we feel this remark captures the essence of what we have found so far in two important ways. ‘Common what?’ refers firstly to a widespread lack of awareness about what the modern Commonwealth is and secondly to the vital question of what exactly the Commonwealth’s 53 member states share in common that sets this association apart from other international groupings.

Aims of the Commonwealth Conversation:

- To gather views about the Commonwealth and its future
- To identify key issues on which the Commonwealth should focus
- To help re-vitalise the Commonwealth and re-connect it to a new generation
- To develop recommendations to present to Commonwealth leaders and policymakers
- To raise awareness about the Commonwealth

Ours is not the first attempt to think about the future of the Commonwealth. Previous reviews have ranged from the highest political levels (including the most recent High Level Review in 2001) to independent research, some even under the auspices of the RCS itself (e.g. *The Future of the Commonwealth: A Golden Opportunity* (RCS, 1997) and *Reinventing the Commonwealth* (Kate Ford & Sunder Katwala, 1999)). The pages of the leading Commonwealth academic journal *The Round Table* are replete with similar stock-takes (e.g. Schreuder (October 2002), Auplat (February 2007), Kaul (October 2007), Marshall (October 2009), and Ware (October 2009)).

So why another review?

- Firstly, it is neither surprising nor worrying for any organisation and those working closely with it to want, or indeed need, to think strategically about where it is heading from time to time.
- Secondly, we believe the Conversation is different from previous undertakings in at least one important way: the process that has led to this report has sought to engage a truly wide audience (see section 2 for details). We believe a public consultation is particularly apt: the Commonwealth prides itself on being an association of peoples as much as it is an association of countries.
- Thirdly, this is a consultation about the whole Commonwealth family, not just the intergovernmental Commonwealth. We believe these findings will be just as relevant to those organisations, like the RCS, that work to promote the Commonwealth and the values that underpin it.

The modern Commonwealth has achieved a great deal in the sixty years since it first rose from the ashes of the British Empire in 1949. We do not have space, nor is it within our remit, to list all of these achievements within this report, though particular highlights include the Commonwealth’s good work in the area of election monitoring; the championing of small states; the sharing of technical expertise and good practice; and cultural, educational and professional exchange.



Yet, today there are worrying levels of ignorance about what the Commonwealth is, and serious work will be needed to convince policymakers and the public alike that this is an association worth supporting.

“ IF THIS IS WHAT THE COMMONWEALTH IS TRYING TO DO, WHY DO THE COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES NOT SEEM TO ADVERTISE THIS TO THEIR CITIZENS? IT SEEMS THAT LOTS OF CITIZENS OF COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT IT DOES. ”

Student, Canada, Online Focus Group

Published to coincide with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Trinidad and Tobago, we hope this report itself will generate more discussion about the future of the Commonwealth, and ideas for how to revitalise the association. We urge anyone who has an interest in seeing the Commonwealth and the aims that underpin it thrive in the 21st century to take note of our findings. We also urge readers to share reactions and views with us over the next few months as we prepare our final report to be published in early 2010.

Many of the views presented here (quotes from various Conversation activities are littered throughout the report) are unashamedly provocative. We have included them because they are representative of much of what we have heard during the Conversation and because we firmly believe that even the best institutions have to be able to answer their critics.

“ I SUPPORT THE COMMONWEALTH CONVERSATION. IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT DISCOURSE TAKES PLACE ABOUT THE COMMONWEALTH, SO THAT IT IS NO LONGER SEEN AS WORKING ALONG RIGID PATHS OR AS BEING SOMETHING BELONGING TO THE PAST, BUT RATHER SOMETHING WHICH BELONGS TO THE FUTURE, A FUTURE THAT IS BEING SHAPED THROUGH THIS DISCOURSE ABOUT EXPECTATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES. ”

Commonwealth Secretary-General, Kamallesh Sharma

“ IT IS NICE TO SEE THAT THE COMMONWEALTH IS ACTUALLY INTERESTED TO KNOW WHERE IT STANDS TODAY. IT'S VERY IMPORTANT FOR ANY ORGANISATION TO CHECK ON ITS SHORTCOMINGS AND WORK ON THEM. ”

Student, India, Online Focus Group

2. THE CONVERSATION SO FAR...

Since its launch, the Commonwealth Conversation has reached out to tens of thousands of people from all corners of the world. We are acutely aware that the success of any public consultation rests on its ability to reach a wide range of people. Given the diversity of the Commonwealth, this has been a significant challenge for the Conversation, especially considering time and resource constraints. Determined to gather as many views as possible, we have utilised the following consultation methods over the course of the last four months.

Since July 2009, we have...

- Conducted nationally representative opinion polls in 7 Commonwealth countries with a combined sample of 6,200
- Had over 30,000 visits to our website and social media pages from almost all Commonwealth countries (and 100+ other countries)
- Received 1,500+ comments via the website, email and post
- Surveyed more than 1,250 people, including key opinion leaders, in over 40 countries
- Conducted some 70 events in 21 Commonwealth countries across all regions involving approximately 2600 people
- Generated extensive media coverage, including 15 op-ed pieces in leading national newspapers around the Commonwealth
- Convened 8 expert groups on key aspects of the Commonwealth's work
- Convened bespoke online focus groups involving young people from around the Commonwealth

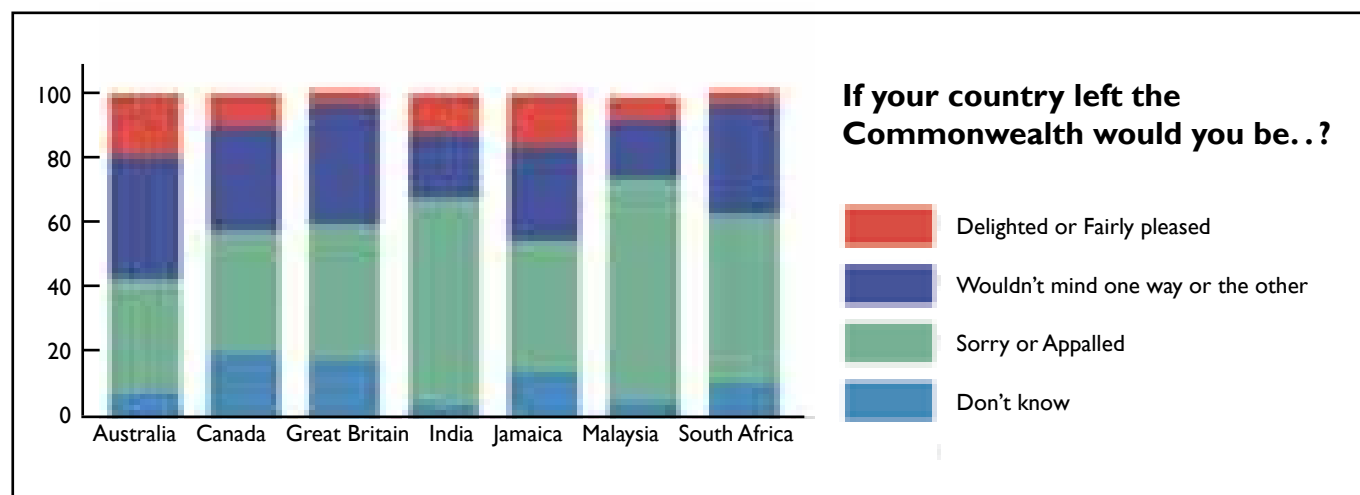
OPINION POLLING

To launch the Conversation, we used opinion polling to test awareness about the Commonwealth in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, India, Jamaica, Malaysia and South Africa. Although sample sizes and methodologies varied across the countries, these were nationally representative surveys that asked a series of similar questions about what people knew and thought of the Commonwealth. Full details of the polls and their results are available on the Conversation website.

Key poll findings included:

- On average, people in developing countries were twice as likely to think the Commonwealth was important compared to developed countries.
- Only about a third of Australians or Canadians would be sorry or appalled if their country left the Commonwealth, compared to two-thirds of Indians and Malaysians.
- Only a third of people polled could name any activity the Commonwealth did, and most of those people listed the Commonwealth Games.
- Only half of people polled knew the Queen was the head of the Commonwealth, and a quarter of Jamaicans think President Barack Obama is head.

SELECTED OPINION POLL RESULTS



ONLINE ACTIVITIES

The centrepiece of the Conversation has been our **interactive website**, www.thecommonwealthconversation.org. So far, we have posted 90 'Conversation Starters' about the future of the Commonwealth on a range of themes, and invited visitors to have their say by leaving comments. Highlights include contributions from the President of the Maldives, Mohammed Nasheed; the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, David Miliband; the former President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda; the Sri Lankan cricketer, Muttiah Muralitharan; the former Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard; the Trinidad and Tobago footballer, Dwight Yorke; and the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Morgan Tsvangirai. Some of the most popular topics of debate have included the headship of the Commonwealth, what the Commonwealth should be doing on Sri Lanka, trade links across the Commonwealth, the benefits of Commonwealth scholarships and exchanges, and the Commonwealth's record on Zimbabwe. Over 500 website users have also shared more thoughts through our online survey, and over 1,700 people have answered one of our rotating poll questions.

In order to make sure we capture the views of opinion formers around the Commonwealth, we have also commissioned a bespoke **opinion leaders survey**. Using a specialist researcher, we have identified key leaders from academia, journalism, policymaking, parliament, business, education, civil society, and international organisations. We have so far had responses from over half of the Commonwealth's member states and hope to have a near complete coverage of the Commonwealth by the end of the Conversation.

Given that the key to the future of the Commonwealth rests with the younger generation (not to mention that the Commonwealth theme for 2009 is 'Serving a new generation'), we have also gone out of our way to target young people:

- We have a significant presence on social networking sites and have built up a solid following on Facebook (www.facebook.com/thercs), Twitter (www.twitter.com/DannyRCS) and YouTube (www.youtube.com/TheRCSociety).
- We commissioned an expert team to design and conduct two bespoke **online focus groups**. They recruited 31 university students under the age of 25 from 9 Commonwealth countries to take part in a three-day virtual discussion on bulletin boards. Without knowing at first that the theme of the forum was the Commonwealth, participants logged on during the first day to discuss issues of importance to them. The second day was spent exploring their impressions of the Commonwealth. On the third day, having been given more information about the Commonwealth, participants discussed its future. This experiment revealed again how little people know about the Commonwealth, but how positively they view its potential once they learn more about it. It was also a clear demonstration of the valuable potential network the Commonwealth can provide for young people around the world.
- In collaboration with the British Council, we also hosted a series of **four live debates** in our London headquarters that were streamed live on the internet (and then made available to view as an archive). Held on the themes of climate change, youth voice, the future of the Commonwealth and making best use of the internet, these debates attracted a worldwide audience who were able to ask questions of the panellists, including the Commonwealth Secretary-General, via text chat.

OFFLINE ACTIVITIES

We knew when we started that, in addition to an online presence, physically bringing people together to talk about what the Commonwealth means to them would be vital. We have been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm that people around the world have shown in helping us to achieve this. Whether through a '**Commonwealth Consultation**' involving high-profile speakers or a smaller, informal '**Commonwealth Chat**', people in every region of the Commonwealth have taken part in our events. We provided guidance and materials to organisers as needed, and they have been feeding back results to us through reports, photos, video footage and questionnaires. Some event highlights include:

- In **India**, the Commonwealth Student Welfare Group of India engaged approximately 400 students at 20 events in schools and colleges across the country
- In **New Zealand**, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of International Studies and the RCS Trust in Wellington, enabled a group of 50 school students to produce a video expressing their feelings about the Commonwealth which they then presented to high profile dignitaries, including the Prime Minister
- In **Nigeria**, 70 students, civil society representatives, business people, press and government representatives took part in an event organised by the Commonwealth Youth Organisation of Nigeria

- In the **Maldives**, over 40 people from across Maldivian society met in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, representatives from civil society and academia are taking part in a range of Conversation events in the run up to CHOGM
- In the **UK**, 60 members of Parliament from 35 Commonwealth countries taking part in a conference arranged by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (UK Branch) debated the future of the Commonwealth
- In **Zimbabwe**, the British Council hosted an event at the University of Zimbabwe in which 250 civil society representatives took part in a lively debate about the Commonwealth
- In **Cameroon**, 45 representatives from the fields of government, business, civil society, media and education took part in a high profile event in Buea, managed by the Royal Commonwealth Society of Cameroon

In addition to these events, we have also convened **expert groups** consisting of key stakeholders from within and outside the Commonwealth 'family'. For logistical and cost reasons, all of these expert groups have taken place in the UK, but they have proven to be some of our most insightful and revealing discussions. Four of these discussions covered areas of Commonwealth interest (business, climate change, democracy and human rights, and development) and focused on how the Commonwealth could add particular value in these areas. Another four groups included Commonwealth insiders (senior officials from intergovernmental Commonwealth organisations, representatives of Commonwealth civil society organisations, representatives from High Commissions in London, and young people working in Commonwealth organisations) and focused on how the Commonwealth could improve the way it works.

In order to reach beyond those who can access our online activities or attend Conversation events (and in order to generate wider interest in the Commonwealth), we have put considerable effort into generating media interest in what we have been doing. This has so far resulted in extensive coverage of our poll findings and the events we have been holding around the Commonwealth, as well as general commentary on the future of the association. A key element to our media strategy has been to write bespoke opinion pieces for local newspapers, and so far we have published some 15 comment pieces across the Commonwealth, including in *The Age* (Australia), *Globe & Mail* (Canada), *Financial Express* (India), *New Straits Times* (Malaysia), *Times of Malta* (Malta), *Le Mauricien* (Mauritius), *New Vision* (Uganda), *The Guardian* (Trinidad & Tobago), *Reuters* (UK) and *The Post* (Zambia). A list of key media coverage can be found on the Conversation website and will be printed in the final report.

As a way of getting young people to think about the future of the Commonwealth, we have also launched a 'My Commonwealth' competition. This simple task asks young people under the age of 25 to imagine that they are Secretary-General of the Commonwealth at its 100th birthday in 2049. What would their association look like and do? We have already received inspiring contributions from young people worldwide, and look forward to receiving many more before the closing deadline of 31 December 2009. Details of how to enter can be found on the Conversation website.

Finally, in addition to all the methods above, we have been collecting a number of invaluable comments and opinions about the future of the Commonwealth through email, letter, phone and individual meetings.



3. THE COMMONWEALTH'S PROFILE

“ IT IS HARD TO CARE ABOUT SOMETHING YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT. ”

Student, Canada, Online Focus Group

“ THOSE PARTICIPANTS WHO HAD A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF THE COMMONWEALTH ALL SAID THAT THE FIRST THING THAT CAME TO THEIR MINDS WHEN THEY THOUGHT OF IT WAS BRITISH COLONIES AND THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND, WHO THEY THOUGHT DECIDES EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IN THE COMMONWEALTH. ”

Students 18-25 years old, Nigeria, Report from Consultation Event

While the Commonwealth Conversation has ranged widely over numerous topics and has highlighted many differing areas of concern, we believe that we have encountered one major overarching challenge: profile. Not only does the Commonwealth urgently need to raise its profile, it needs to correct common misperceptions about what it is and does.

At points during the Conversation so far, we have felt overwhelmed by indifference. Of the thousands of people we have encountered during all our consultations, very few were passionately critical of the Commonwealth. But an equally small number of people seem passionately committed to it. We heard again and again that it is hard to “get worked up” about something you neither know nor care about.

Even more worrying, when we did discover pockets of interest, we were often confronted by misconceptions about what the Commonwealth is and does today. The most common include that Britain is still the leader of the association: having both the Secretariat in London and the Queen at its head add fuel to the fire of this myth. When people know so little, they latch on to the few aspects of the Commonwealth that do puncture their consciousness – the Queen, the Games, the imperial legacy – and a rather imbalanced picture begins to emerge. Left unchecked by a higher profile, these misperceptions threaten lasting damage.

During our consultations so far, any suggestion that the Commonwealth suffers from a low profile amongst the general public has often been met by the argument that every international organisation struggles with the same fate. Whilst we believe that our findings suggest that the Commonwealth does have a particular problem in this area, it is important to stress that the issue of profile we raise does not stem only from a lack of awareness amongst the public. We believe that our findings are worrying because they show that the Commonwealth needs to do much more to convince many crucial stakeholder groups of its continued relevance:

- There are public concerns that the association is irrelevant or elitist
- Many policymakers are frustrated with what they get from the Commonwealth; it is slipping further and further down their list of international policy vehicles
- Many Commonwealth ‘insiders’ are disillusioned by the neglect shown by member states towards the association

This is why profile matters: key stakeholders question its continued usefulness; insiders think it isn't taken seriously enough; and the public question its relevance.

Beyond the framework of our consultation, there are many visible and obvious signs that the Commonwealth has fallen in significance as a player on the international stage. During the Conversation, almost no-one has argued that, in today's crowded marketplace of international actors, the Commonwealth still enjoys the visible and influential role that once it did. Since its inception sixty years ago, the global context in which the Commonwealth is operating has changed dramatically, yet it has failed to adapt.

The Commonwealth's role during and in the aftermath of the conflict in Sri Lanka is a good example of how its profile has changed in recent decades. Many contributors to the Conversation, including some passionate voices on our website, have suggested that the Commonwealth failed to act in any meaningful way in that country, whether it was to offer constructive help or to condemn what was going on.

In our consultations, we have repeatedly asked policy-makers to cite examples of when they might reach for the Commonwealth in their "policy toolbox" – in what situation today does the Commonwealth offer unique value? Not one has been able to provide us with a compelling answer; many struggle to think of any suggestions at all. The Commonwealth simply does not feature on their radar.

“ THERE IS A GREAT DANGER OF BELIEVING YOUR OWN RHETORIC. THE REST OF THE WORLD DOES NOT SEE THE COMMONWEALTH AS A DRIVER OF ANY PARTICULAR EXPERTISE. ”

Think tank Director, UK, Expert Discussion on Democracy

“ WITHOUT PROFILE THE COMMONWEALTH CANNOT ASK FOR PUBLIC FUNDS. THIS 'UNDER THE RADAR' APPROACH IS ALL WELL AND GOOD, BUT IS NOT THE MODERN WAY. ”

Website Comment

Couple this indifference at the policy-making level with the fact that, as shown by our polling, only a third of people globally can identify what the Commonwealth is or stands for, and an unsustainable reality begins to emerge.

So how can the Commonwealth begin to tackle this problem of profile? We believe a good starting point is to look to those people who do still love the Commonwealth, and ask why?

4. WHO (STILL) LOVES THE COMMONWEALTH?

“ WHO ON EARTH IS INTERESTED IN THE COMMONWEALTH THESE DAYS – APART FROM A DWINDLING BAND OF SENTIMENTAL ROYALISTS, ACADEMICS SPECIALISING IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND A HANDFUL OF WEARY DIPLOMATS WHO DON'T HAVE ANY CHOICE? ”

Political Commentator, New Zealand, Consultation Event

“ TO ME THE COMMONWEALTH REPRESENTS THE IDEAL VEHICLE FOR DEVELOPMENT, PEACE-BUILDING, SECURITY, EQUALITY, CULTURAL INTEGRATION, TOLERANCE, RESPECT, UNDERSTANDING... BUT THE VEHICLE NEEDS TO MOVE! ”

Student, Uganda, Website Comment

Support for the Commonwealth seems to be at its nadir. Interestingly, based on all the contributions we have had so far to the Conversation, it would seem that there are five broad reasons (NADIR) why, in the face of this, a number of people remain interested in and committed to the Commonwealth:

NOSTALGISTS: in Britain, these are the people who yearn for the UK to play a bigger role in the world and see the Commonwealth as a vehicle for this. In the rest of the world, these are the people who feel a sense of warmth towards an association that they generally know very little about, based on an idea of shared cultures and historical experiences; some even wish for a full or partial return to the days of Empire.

“ A MORE AMBITIOUS AND BETTER-RESOURCED COMMONWEALTH COULD DELIVER INFLUENCE AND REACH FOR BRITISH INTERESTS WHICH OTHER NATIONS WOULD ENVY. ”

Member of the House of Lords, UK, Parliamentary Survey

“ GENERALLY SPEAKING, PEOPLE HAVE A SENTIMENTAL ATTACHMENT TO THE COMMONWEALTH AND WOULD FIND IT SAD IF INDIA LEFT, EVEN THOUGH THEY KNOW LITTLE ABOUT WHAT IT DOES BEYOND THE GAMES. ”

Analysis of 60 questionnaires from Consultation event in New Delhi, India

ANGLOPHILES & MONARCHISTS: who see the Commonwealth as a way of strengthening and maintaining bilateral ties with Britain, for example through trade, or military links. This is especially true of those who appreciate the British monarchy and the widely praised unity that The Queen has maintained throughout 57 years as head of the association.

“ THE COMMONWEALTH IS INCONCEIVABLE WITHOUT THE BRITISH MONARCH. THE COMMONWEALTH IS ONE OF BRITAIN’S GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS. IT’S ONLY RIGHT THAT IT IS CENTRED ON BRITAIN AND WE SHOULD NOT BE ASHAMED TO MAINTAIN OUR LOYALTY. ”

RCS Branch Member, Australia, Consultation event

“ I THINK INDIANS ARE QUITE HAPPY WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH. IT MEANS WE CAN KEEP IN TOUCH WITH OUR BRITISH INFLUENCES TO THE EXTENT WE WANT TO. ”

Student, India, Online Focus Group

DIRECT BENEFICIARIES: those who have participated in and benefitted from the Commonwealth’s activities whether through scholarships and exchanges, through sport, in youth programmes, or as the beneficiary of technical assistance.

“ AS A COMMONWEALTH SCHOLAR, THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN AS ENRICHING AND VALUABLE AS I EXPECTED IT TO BE. I HAVE ENJOYED THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY WHICH HAS BEEN BUILT THROUGH NETWORKING WITH OTHER STUDENTS FROM COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES...I HAVE [ALSO] BEEN FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO HAVE BUILT STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMONWEALTH CITIZENS THROUGH MY PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH YOUTH FORUM AND COMMONWEALTH YOUTH EXCHANGE. THESE INITIATIVES HAVE HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPRESSION ON ME AND THE WAY I THINK... ”

Commonwealth scholar, Jamaica, Website Comment

“ MY EXPERIENCE IS THAT PEOPLE KNOW MOST ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS THAT GIVE THEM THE GREATEST BENEFIT. IT HAS TO BE ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE PEOPLE HAVE. ”

Chair of British Council, UK, Online Discussion

INTERNATIONALISTS: those who see the Commonwealth as a way of promoting international understanding and pursuing progress towards shared goals, especially those who remember fondly the fraternity and cooperation that were fostered in the early days of the association.

“ WE NEED THE COMMONWEALTH SO AS TO BE PART OF THE BIGGER WORLD. ”

Participant, Zimbabwe, Consultation Event

“ THE LUSAKA CHOGM WAS ONE OF THE COMMONWEALTH’S GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS. WHERE MANY OTHER ORGANISATIONS HAD FAILED, THE COMMONWEALTH SUCCEEDED IN EFFECTING RADICAL AND LASTING CHANGE. WE CAME TOGETHER WITH A COLLECTIVE UNITY OF PURPOSE AND A DETERMINATION TO MOVE BEYOND RHETORIC INTO ACTION. ”

Former President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, Interview with the RCS

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDERS: those who populate the various civil society groups and professional associations that underpin the Commonwealth; a group that values the Commonwealth for the networks that can be built within it.

“ IF WE WANT THE COMMONWEALTH ITSELF TO SURVIVE AS A CREATIVE ASSOCIATION OF PEOPLES, THE LINKS THAT ARE FORMED THROUGH ITS CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORKS ARE A KEY INGREDIENT OF THAT. ”

Commonwealth CSO representative, Civil Society Consultation event

These motivations for continued interest in the Commonwealth go to the heart of the challenge facing those of us who want to rebuild the association’s profile. Fostering Anglophilia and consistently focusing on the Commonwealth’s history go against what the modern association stands for. Given the relatively small resource-base of most Commonwealth organisations, trying to increase the number of their direct beneficiaries or their reach in any dramatic way will be difficult.

This leaves promoting the role of the Commonwealth in international affairs, and making better use of its enviable networks, as the most promising options. Importantly, this also means focusing not on the historical reasons for the Commonwealth’s existence and what it has achieved, but on what it stands for today and how it can add value to people’s lives in the future.



5. BOLD NOT OLD

The need to look to the future and not just to the past has been a consistent theme throughout the Conversation so far. Our evidence suggests that while history is important to understanding the Commonwealth, *history alone* will not make more people love it; a lesson that Commonwealth insiders would be well placed to learn. The idea that the Commonwealth should be taught in school curricula is a good case in point. The evidence we have heard suggests that, while this may help to build the Commonwealth's profile amongst young people, something more fundamental is needed to win hearts and minds. Identifying and articulating a renewed sense of purpose will be critical. Achieving this will find the Commonwealth re-entering school textbooks on its own merit, not because it is forced there out of a sense of duty.

“ IF THEIR ACTIONS ARE NOT NOTICEABLE ENOUGH TO GARNER THE ATTENTION OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIA, PERHAPS THEY AREN'T DOING ENOUGH OR THE RIGHT THINGS. ”

Student, Canada, Online Focus Group

Based on all that we have heard during the Conversation so far, we believe that building the profile of the Commonwealth will require a focus on three areas. These are the three Commonwealth P's – principles, priorities, and people – that are key to the association's future.

PRINCIPLES

Our consultations show that people are no longer sure what distinguishes the Commonwealth from other international associations apart from its history. It purports to be founded on shared values and certain agreed principles and, indeed, the Singapore Declaration of 1971 and its reaffirmation in the Harare Declaration of 1991 commit the Commonwealth to promoting democracy, freedom, human rights, peace, the rule of law, sustainable development and opportunity for all. Yet the vast majority of people simply do not know that this is what the Commonwealth stands for in the 21st century. This is partly because the Commonwealth does not communicate its message and its identity clearly enough. But the much more serious reason is that the association fails to uphold these principles consistently; a failure which turns its noble Declarations into little more than worthless pieces of paper.

“ MOST STUDENTS FEEL ALMOST DESPERATE FOR AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION TO FOSTER GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND SOLUTIONS FOR THE COLLECTIVE GOOD AND, ONCE PROMPTED ON THE COMMONWEALTH'S VALUES AND ACTIVITIES, BELIEVE IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO FULFIL THIS ROLE. ”

Report of Online Focus Group findings, including 30 students from 9 countries

Upholding values

Oppressive, undemocratic regimes, human rights abuses and inequality are far too common in the Commonwealth today. The President of the Gambia recently publicly stated that he would “kill” anyone who “collaborates with human rights defenders”. This threat followed a long catalogue of human rights abuses in the country. The Commonwealth’s response? Silence.

During the course of the Conversation, this unwillingness to speak out on potentially controversial issues has often been attributed by Commonwealth insiders to the association’s need to work as a “trusted partner” of its member countries. Once it condemns, we are told, it has effectively burnt its bridges with the country in question and can no longer hope to effect change from within through the diplomatic efforts of the Secretary-General’s Good Offices.

Whilst we recognise that a balance must be struck between the quiet behind-the-scenes efforts which can prove so fruitful and the taking of a strong public stance when the situation calls for it, we would argue that this current balancing act seems not to be winning over new supporters to the Commonwealth cause. In recent years, the Commonwealth has come to be perceived as overly risk averse and terrified of causing offence.

“ THE COMMONWEALTH MUST NOT BE AFRAID OF OFFENDING AND OF NAMING AND SHAMING MEMBER STATES, ON OCCASION; IT MUST NOT WORRY ABOUT AWKWARD MOMENTS OVER CANAPÉS WITH HIGH COMMISSIONERS IN LONDON. ”

Website comment

Again, Gambia is an ideal case in point. During our consultations, we discovered that recent requests from the Commonwealth Secretariat for access and talks with the government were flatly refused. Yet still, with no bridges left to burn, the Commonwealth lacks the nerve to speak out.

“ COMMONWEALTH MEMBERSHIP SHOULD BE A BADGE OF HONOUR FOR COUNTRIES. IT SHOULD SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD, THEIR STRONG DEMOCRACY, THEIR GOOD GOVERNANCE... AT THE MOMENT IT SAYS NOTHING; IT MEANS NOTHING. ”

Intergovernmental Commonwealth employee, Consultation Event

During our consultations, whilst people have recognised the need for the Commonwealth to be seen as a “trusted partner”, they have repeatedly questioned whether this must surely not also depend upon being trusted to push for positive outcomes; being trusted to uphold the principles all member states sign up to; and being trusted to show consistency between word and action. The Commonwealth must ask itself at what point “soft power” becomes too flaccid to achieve anything.

The promising news is that most young people we have encountered during the Commonwealth Conversation, once told about the values that underpin the Commonwealth, are positively inspired. Being seen as a true champion of the principles it purports to uphold will almost certainly be the most effective way of engaging a new generation of people who will not recall the association's successes against white rule in Rhodesia or apartheid in South Africa.

Leadership

“ THE COMMONWEALTH IS ONLY AS GOOD AS ITS LEADERS... AND WHAT IS MISSING IS THE RIGHT KIND OF LEADERSHIP. ”

Journalist, India, Website Comment

Much of this will, in turn, depend on leadership. One of the points raised most frequently by seasoned observers of Commonwealth affairs has been the critical role played by Sir Shridath Ramphal in his time as Commonwealth Secretary-General.

“ CRITICAL TO THE SUCCESS OF THE 1979 LUSAKA DECLARATION AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID IN SOUTHERN AFRICA 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. ”

Sir Malcolm Fraser, Former Prime Minister of Australia

We have been told that, as an innately political animal, Ramphal was unafraid of causing offence when he felt a situation called for strong words or actions; he was not prepared to compromise on principles for the sake of a quiet life. Tellingly, his term in office (1975-1990) did not see a mass exodus of offended Commonwealth countries; rather it is portrayed as the time of a dynamic and influential Commonwealth that achieved results. In contrast, we have been told that the last decade has seen a retreat into safe “consensus messages”.

“ THE COMMONWEALTH IS JUST TOO TIMID; THAT'S THE PROBLEM. ”

Senior official, a developing Commonwealth country, Consultation Event



This raises the question of whether the Commonwealth, particularly in the person of its Secretary-General, should have a voice over and beyond that of its member governments. All 53 member governments are rarely going to agree on what the SG should say about one issue or another. Those inside the intergovernmental Commonwealth have been almost unanimous in their defence of the consensus approach to decision-making that makes the association so unique - where small island states like Tonga and St. Lucia sit down at a table on a par with G8 countries like the UK and Canada. While this approach will have clear benefits, relying on “consensus messaging” alone results in bland Commonwealth statements which challenge no-one and render the association and its activities uninteresting to the media and public alike.

“ THERE ARE SOME HUGE ATTRACTIVE ATTRIBUTES OF THE COMMONWEALTH THAT MAKE IT UNIQUE - PARTICULARLY ITS RESPECT FOR DEMOCRACY AND THE HARARE PRINCIPALS. THE VOICE OF THE COMMONWEALTH THEREFORE COULD HAVE HUGE MORAL AUTHORITY. IT COULD ONLY ACHIEVE THIS IF IT DIDN'T FOCUS ON 'LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR CHRISTMAS TREE STATEMENTS'.

Report, South Africa, Consultation Event

“ CURRENTLY, THE COMMONWEALTH HAS NOTHING TO SAY ABOUT THE ISSUES THAT MATTER MOST TO THE WORLD. THAT IS WHY PEOPLE HAVE NOTHING TO SAY ABOUT THE COMMONWEALTH.

RCS Branch member, Canada, Consultation event

CMAG

CMAG, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group created by heads of government in 1995 and made up of nine rotating foreign ministers, is evidence of the political will that does exist to see the Commonwealth's principles upheld. The Commonwealth is the only international organisation to have created such machinery of self-discipline and, during our consultations, we have found it to be widely admired in principle. CMAG's remit is clear: it is mandated to deal with serious or persistent violations of the Harare Declaration. Yet many people have told us that despite its great potential, CMAG has been far too timid.

“ IT IS WORRYING TO NOTE THAT CMAG HAS BY AND BY INTERPRETED ITS MANDATE VERY NARROWLY TO FOCUS ONLY ON THE UNCONSTITUTIONAL OVERTHROW OF GOVERNMENTS ALBEIT SELECTIVELY.

Maja Daruwala, Executive Director Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Website article

“ I ONLY HOPE MEMBERS WILL TAKE UP THE ISSUE OF CMAG REFORM AT THE FORTHCOMING CONFERENCE. IF THEY DON'T, IT MEANS THEY AREN'T SERIOUS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS. THEN THEY SHOULD CLOSE UP SHOP. ”

Website comment

We have been told that, until CMAG sharpens its teeth, the Commonwealth will continue to be associated with the historical bonds that originally threw it together and not the contemporary principles that define it today. If CMAG is to become the primary conduit for the Commonwealth's moral authority, many have argued that it must be reformed and its remit widened to include gross and sustained human rights abuses. It is high time that through reform of this important mechanism, the Commonwealth recognises that democracy means much more than elections alone. A formal mechanism for holding member states accountable to the principles they have signed up to is a powerful and unique selling point for the Commonwealth. Member states must decide whether they want its potential to be realised.

“ UNTIL AND UNLESS THE COMMONWEALTH TAKES PROPER AND APPROPRIATE ACTION AGAINST MEMBER COUNTRIES THAT HAVE POOR HUMAN RIGHTS RECORDS OR WHICH FAIL TO IMPROVE THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN A GIVEN PERIOD OF TIME, THE CORE OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMONWEALTH...WILL JUST BE A WRITTEN DOCUMENT WITHOUT HAVING ANY EFFECT IN PRACTICE. ”

Website comment

“ WE ARE SO TERRIFIED OF COUNTRIES WALKING AWAY. BUT WOULD A COMMONWEALTH OF 35 MEMBER STATES WHO ALL ACTUALLY ADHERE TO OUR PRINCIPLES BE SO MUCH WORSE THAN WHAT WE HAVE NOW? ”

Intergovernmental Commonwealth employee, Consultation Event

Given the fundamental importance of principles and values to the Commonwealth's role and profile in the 21st century, their imminent re-statement is to be welcomed. However, we have heard that for such a re-statement to have any effect:

- Commonwealth principles need to go beyond existing commitments that countries have made in other fora
- They must be owned by all member states, not just a few Western ones
- They need to be communicated in a publicly accessible and powerful way
- The Commonwealth must demonstrate that these principles will directly and meaningfully inform all its work

“ THE COMMONWEALTH’S VALUES AND PRINCIPLES MUST BE IDENTIFIED AND NARROWED DOWN TO PERHAPS TWO OR THREE THINGS. THESE MUST THEN DIRECTLY INFORM THE APPROACH THE COMMONWEALTH TAKES TO KEY GLOBAL ISSUES. ”

Senior Official, a developing Commonwealth Country, Consultation Event

PRIORITIES

“ ESTABLISH THOSE THINGS THAT ONLY THE COMMONWEALTH AS AN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTION CAN DO; ARTICULATE THEM; ESTABLISH FRAMEWORKS FOR PERFORMANCE AND BECOME ACCOUNTABLE TO ALL MEMBER NATIONS AND THEIR CITIZENS FOR ACHIEVING THEM. ”

Opinion Leaders’ Survey

During the course of the Commonwealth Conversation, we have been asking participants, from members of the general public to senior policy-makers to Commonwealth insiders, what key issues they think the Commonwealth should be focussing on. We have collected literally dozens of different responses: terrorism, food shortages, the financial crisis, trade, education, climate change, election observation... and so on. Some, unsurprisingly, have reoccurred more frequently than others: our statistics show us that democracy and good governance, education and climate change are cited most often.

“ I THINK THE GREAT STRENGTH OF THE COMMONWEALTH IS THAT, HISTORICALLY, IT HAS MADE GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW ITS PRIORITY AND I THINK THAT SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE ITS CORE BUSINESS AND ITS CORE STRENGTH. ”

Steven Smith MP, Australian Foreign Minister, Interview for Conversation website

“ CLIMATE CHANGE SHOULD BE A CENTRAL FOCUS OF THE COMMONWEALTH SINCE MOST OF THE MEMBER STATES ARE EXPOSED TO THE CRITICAL IMPACT OF THE PHENOMENON. ”

Report from Consultation Event in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with a range of media experts, NGOs and diplomats)

“ STUDENTS ARE EXTREMELY EAGER TO SEE THE COMMONWEALTH PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN EDUCATION, PARTICULARLY AIDING YOUNGER CHILDREN (ESPECIALLY GIRLS) TO ACCESS PRIMARY EDUCATION, BUT ALSO EXTENDING OUT TO YOUNG ADULTS’ ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION. ”

Report of Online Focus Group, including 30 students from 9 countries

But, rather than add to the voices clamouring for the Commonwealth to focus on one thing or another, we think there is a more fundamental battle to be won. The evidence we have collected underlines the importance of not spreading the work of the association too thinly. It must be streamlined into a few key areas where the Commonwealth can clearly and consistently add value.

Identifying added value

Compared to many other international organisations, the Commonwealth has a tiny budget. It works, for example, on approximately one-third of 1% of the budget of the UK Department for International Development. This should make it clear that the Commonwealth must not attempt to behave like a development agency. It must not attempt to duplicate the work being carried out by other hugely resourced organisations; rather it needs to deploy its unique characteristics in as effective a way as possible.

“ IN 1965, WHEN THE SECRETARIAT WAS BEING SET UP, THE COMMONWEALTH WAS WORKING ON MANY DIFFERENT THINGS, BUT IT WAS KNOWN FOR ONLY ONE – FIGHTING RACISM. IT HAD A CLEAR MESSAGE THAT THE PUBLIC COULD IDENTIFY WITH. IT NEEDS TO FIND THIS AGAIN AND STOP TRYING TO COMPETE WITH OTHER MUCH BETTER FUNDED INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS. ”

Commonwealth CSO Representative, Civil Society Consultation event

We have been told that the Commonwealth does not fit comfortably into the “Millennium Development Goal paradigm” within which donors and governments now work, and so policy makers quickly become frustrated and disillusioned by it. Indeed, one senior employee of a large development agency told us that when it comes to Commonwealth projects, they generally do not attempt to use the same evaluation measures required of most grants: “We just give the money out of historical obligation and write it off”.

As several employees of the intergovernmental Commonwealth have acknowledged, simple steps could be taken to improve monitoring and evaluation systems. However, from all that we have heard, it is clear to us that, most importantly, the Commonwealth must move away from areas of work that are done much more effectively by other organisations; it must identify the areas where it brings most added value; and it must use this to carve out its distinct role on the international stage.

This need not entail a simplistic identification of what area the Commonwealth should focus on (e.g. climate change or human rights); rather it could be a creative opportunity to think about *how* the Commonwealth works. For example, the Commonwealth might choose to exploit its comparative advantage in providing a ‘good offices’ function or in convening diverse groups to promote dialogue. Perhaps it could be the international association that ‘fills the gaps’ left by other, bigger, less agile institutions. Or perhaps it will focus on being a vocal and effective champion of democracy or action to tackle climate change.

Whatever the case, it seems clear that member states will not be prepared to give more money without seeing improved impact or returns. We have heard from numerous sources, both governmental and from within the Commonwealth family itself, that member states have been pushing for the Secretariat to streamline its work for several years. It is time for some decisive action.

“ GOVERNMENTS HAVE BEEN LET DOWN AGAIN AND AGAIN BY THE SECRETARIAT. TIME AND AGAIN, WE HAVE ASKED THEM TO PRIORITISE AND CUT BACK THEIR ACTIVITIES, YET THEY HAVE FAILED TO LISTEN. ”

Senior Official, a developed Commonwealth country, Consultation Event

Priorities bring profile

This is not only a question of effectiveness, it relates back directly to our overarching challenge of profile. In the 1980s, through its fight against apartheid, the Commonwealth was widely known for challenging racism. Today, it is not known for anything in particular. Spreading itself too thinly across too many areas, its identity is fragmented, its message vague and its impact weak.

The communiqués issued from Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings are symptomatic of this problem. So obsessed is the Commonwealth with giving everyone an equal voice, that in the end it says nothing of importance.

“ COMMONWEALTH COMMUNIQUEÉS INCLUDE EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE KITCHEN SINK. THERE IS NO ATTEMPT TO FOCUS IN ON PRIORITIES. ”

Senior official, Caribbean, Consultation Event

It is unavoidable that 53 different countries will all bring different interests to the table at a meeting such as the CHOGM. Indeed, the chance to debate these at frank leaders’ retreats, to share experiences and learn to appreciate the position of others, is one of the Commonwealth’s core strengths. Yet at some point, brave decision-making must come into play; at some point priorities must emerge. If Commonwealth communiqués focused in on key messages, not only would they have far greater public



impact (at present they have almost none), they would present a much clearer, more workable, urgently needed, institutional mandate.

“ THE DECLINE OF THE COMMONWEALTH CAN BE TRACED TO THAT GREATEST DELUSION: IT CANNOT BE A POLITICAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, BUSINESS, EDUCATIONAL, DEMOCRACY-SPREADING, HUMAN RIGHTS FORCE, ALL AT ONCE. ”

Website comment

The need to prioritise applies also to Commonwealth civil society bodies; we address this issue in more detail in the section below.

PEOPLE

“ WE ARE VERY IMPRESSED BY THE COMMONWEALTH: AS YOUTHS WE ARE CONNECTED WITH OUR FELLOW YOUTHS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE WORLD. ”

Students, aged 15-20, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, Consultation event

One unanimous message emerging from the Conversation so far is that the Commonwealth is buttressed by a unique collection of civil society organisations and professional bodies, a global network of people-to-people links that is unrivalled by any other international association. Indeed it is the people involved in these bodies in some way, or the people whose lives have been touched by their work, who speak with the greatest warmth and admiration for the Commonwealth. This affection for the Commonwealth, this affinity with the shared history, culture and values it represents, is real and its value should not be underestimated.

“ THE STRENGTHS OF THE COMMONWEALTH, ITS DIVERSITY AND COMMON VALUES AND SOLIDARITY, MEANS IT IS WELL PLACED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE. ”

Commonwealth CSO Director, Website Comment

One of the most popular topics thus far on our website has been the value of Commonwealth scholarships. Dozens of people have spoken passionately about the transformative impact of these educational opportunities on their lives. Indeed, the two areas of Commonwealth work most often identified by respondents to our Opinion Leaders' Survey were scholarships and cultural exchange. For the small number of people whose lives have been directly touched by programmes such as this, the Commonwealth has real significance and enjoys strong support.

“ THE COMMONWEALTH IS VERY MUCH DEFINED BY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES. FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE, IT ISN'T ABOUT GOOD OFFICES OR GOOD GOVERNANCE WORKSHOPS; IT'S ABOUT THE FACT THAT THEY GOT A SCHOLARSHIP, WON AN ESSAY PRIZE, [OR] WENT TO A COMMONWEALTH COUNTRY FOR THEIR GAP YEAR BECAUSE THEY SPOKE ENGLISH THERE. THIS IS THE “INVISIBLE GLUE” OF THE COMMONWEALTH THAT PEOPLE TALK ABOUT.

Round Table Scholar, Canada, Young Experts Discussion

However, we would argue that the obvious benefits being derived from their work only makes modernisation of the Commonwealth's people-to-people bodies all the more important. For all is not as rosy as it first might seem.

The charge of elitism

“ ONLY THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW ABOUT THE COMMONWEALTH TAKE ADVANTAGE.

Student, Maldives, Young Commonwealth Climate Change Summit

“ NETWORKING AMONG NATIONS NEEDS TO BE EXTENDED TO ALL SECTORS OF SOCIETY AND NOT LEFT AT THE LEADERSHIP AND ELITIST LEVELS.

Participant, Cameroon, Consultation Event

Perhaps ironically for an association which prides itself on its diversity, more than once during the Conversation the Commonwealth was charged with being elitist. Unfortunately, many Commonwealth civil society organisations would find it difficult to defend themselves against this accusation. Our own organisation is a case in point. We often boast about one of our flagship projects - a schools essay competition which engages thousands of young people around the world every year. In fact, it reaches the same 1,600 schools, the majority of them well-off, independent institutions in the capital cities of Commonwealth countries. This simply is not good enough, and we are committed to change. When we consider that (as our study has shown) those people who have been directly touched by Commonwealth programmes are the people who are most passionately supportive of it, it becomes clear that expanding, or diversifying the reach of these programmes should be a priority for anyone interested in seeing the Commonwealth become relevant to a new generation.

The need to innovate

People often note that nearly 90 civil society and professional associations bear the Commonwealth name and make up the wider Commonwealth 'family'. It is true that there is some outstanding work going on in Commonwealth civil society bodies, but the overall picture is patchy at best. Concerns have been expressed that a growing proportion of these bodies are moribund, a higher number still are staffed solely by an older generation of volunteers, and a few Commonwealth associations may involve international networks but have little to do with the basic precepts of the Commonwealth itself.

“ COMMONWEALTH CIVIL SOCIETY AND PROFESSIONAL BODIES ARE TOO AGED, TOO MALE AND TOO WHITE. THEY ARE ALSO TOO UK-BASED. THEY ARE NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE YOUNG COMMONWEALTH. BUT THEY ARE DEVOTED TO IT. ”

Commonwealth CSO Representative, Civil Society Consultation event

Civil society bodies must begin to seriously address the issue of how to engage more young people in their work. Several CSOs openly admitted during our consultations that, unless something changed, they would be gone within a generation. Given the severe limitation of funds in today's depressed economic climate, the picture looks particularly stark. Without determination across the board to seek better resourcing, to work in more innovative ways and to capture the imagination of a younger generation, a large proportion of the family of Commonwealth civil society bodies – and with it some of their best work – risks extinction.

There is no doubt that Commonwealth civil society has great potential, yet to unleash this fully, some pruning of stagnant organisations must take place. In some cases, we have been told that the 'Commonwealth' tag is simply a convenient way for an organisation to gain an international presence, rather than a fundamental *raison d'être* of its work. Many CSOs work in only a few Commonwealth countries, or have regional programmes that regularly include non-Commonwealth members. We have heard that the accreditation process for CSOs, and the watchdog function over the 'Commonwealth' name, needs to be much more robust.

“ DESPITE THE PRESENCE [OF COMMONWEALTH CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS] THEIR EFFECTIVENESS AND SIGNIFICANCE IS QUESTIONABLE.... ARE THEY NOT GETTING ENOUGH SUPPORT TO RAISE THE PROFILE OF THE COMMONWEALTH? DO THEY NEED PROPER GUIDANCE AND A WATCHFUL EYE FROM THE COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT IN ORDER TO BE RELEVANT? ”

CSO representative, Uganda, Website Article

The need to coordinate

“ COMMONWEALTH CIVIL SOCIETY HAS NO CLEAR OR UNIFIED VISION. EVERYONE COMES WITH THEIR OWN AGENDA. WE SHOULD DECIDE COLLECTIVELY ON TWO OR THREE KEY ISSUES THAT ARE MOST IMPORTANT AND PUSH THEM. WE NEED TO COORDINATE BETTER. CIVIL SERVANTS NEED A CLEAR MESSAGE – THEY WILL NOT TAKE NOTICE OF LOTS OF LONG-WINDED DOCUMENTS AND NEITHER WILL THE PUBLIC. ”

Commonwealth CSO Representative, Jamaica, Civil Society Consultation event

“ THERE ARE SEVERAL ACTIVE COMMONWEALTH NETWORKS FOR CITIZENS, HOWEVER THEY ARE NOT JOINED UP ... IF THESE ASSOCIATIONS WERE LINKED, THEY COULD BE A VERY EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR ENGAGING THE LARGER CANADIAN PUBLIC ON COMMONWEALTH ISSUES. ”

Participant, Canada, Consultation event

During our consultations we have repeatedly heard about the need for Commonwealth civil society bodies to become more professional and coordinated in the way they interact with the intergovernmental Commonwealth. This comes back to the need to prioritise. The diversity of interests represented by Commonwealth CSOs and professional bodies is a great strength. At every one of the numerous Commonwealth ministerial meetings, there are at least some CSOs who will be lobbying on the theme in hand, be it education, finance or health.

However, when it comes to the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, Commonwealth CSOs are doing themselves a great disservice by not coordinating their efforts. With every organisation simply pushing their own agenda, the civil society statements presented to leaders become exhaustive lists of concerns, with little regard to how the Commonwealth can add value. If messages were more strongly worded and focused, the more public and media attention they would attract and the more pressure there would be on leaders to show that they take the voice of Commonwealth civil society seriously.

“ NGOS DON'T SPEND TIME LOBBYING IN COMMONWEALTH CIRCLES, AS IT ISN'T SEEN AS IMPORTANT. THE MAJORITY OF SERIOUS, LARGE NGOS DON'T FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH, LIKE THEY WOULD THE UN MEETINGS. THE CHOGM IS NOT IMPORTANT. ”

NGO representative, Expert Discussion on Development

During the Conversation, we also consulted widely with non-Commonwealth civil society organisations. We would have liked to consult with more, but found it was extremely difficult to get them to talk about the Commonwealth – it means very little to them. It is notable that the international NGO community does not consider Commonwealth ministerial meetings to be crucial lobbying opportunities. It seems that, if leaders are reluctant to reach for the Commonwealth in their foreign policy toolbox, the NGO community is just as reticent. Their limited representation at these meetings and their outright dismissal of their importance is a damning indictment. It is clear that the mechanisms in place to facilitate the interaction of the intergovernmental and non-governmental Commonwealth need serious overhaul. Without reform, the Commonwealth will remain detached from, and irrelevant to, the majority of global civil society.

The need for accessibility

“ THERE IS A LACK OF OPENNESS ABOUT THE WAY IN WHICH THE COMMONWEALTH WORKS; A LOT IS DONE BEHIND CLOSED DOORS. IF THE COMMONWEALTH IS SUPPOSED TO STAND FOR DEMOCRACY AND TRANSPARENCY, THIS NEEDS TO CHANGE. ”

Think tank Director, Expert Discussion on Democracy

For an association which prides itself on its commitment to democracy, the intergovernmental Commonwealth is remarkably inaccessible – too much is done behind closed doors, under the guise of impenetrable jargon and convoluted processes – whilst the non-governmental Commonwealth seems remarkably willing to accept the status quo. With a few notable exceptions like the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, statements from Commonwealth civil society can appear bland, repetitive and cautious, governed by the rule that “speaking and acting in measured terms is the Commonwealth way of doing things”. This may need to be the case at the intergovernmental level of the Commonwealth (though to what extent is something we addressed earlier in this report), but it certainly need not be the case at the level of civil society. If the aversion to risk and the fear of controversy continue to spill over into the Commonwealth’s civil society organisations, the association has very little hope of raising its profile.

“ THE COMMONWEALTH SAYS ONE OF ITS FOUNDING PRINCIPLES IS THE PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY. BUT THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO DEMOCRACY IN THE WAY THE COMMONWEALTH ITSELF OPERATES. ”

Senior Official, Caribbean, Consultation Event



6. CONCLUSION

“ IN THE YEAR 2049, ONE COULD EXPECT TWO PREMISES. ONE BEING THE TOTAL IRRELEVANCE OF THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE OTHER IT BEING A VIBRANT GLOBAL ENTITY. ”

My Commonwealth competition entrant, 15 years old, Canada

Having digested the findings of the Conversation so far, we want to conclude with some of our initial reflections on what they might mean for the future of the Commonwealth.

We believe that the Commonwealth Conversation has unearthed an association that seems to be loved by too few, often for the wrong reasons. These are worrying times for Commonwealth organisations, including the RCS itself. With public profile low, with increasing scepticism amongst donors and key actors about the value they get from the Commonwealth, and with only a vague sense of what sets the association apart in the 21st century, the Commonwealth seems in desperate need of a makeover. 83% of respondents to our online poll agreed.

We have also discovered an association that seems to be suffering from low aspirations. Often, when we have probed why the Commonwealth is not doing more or even saying more, we have been met with defensiveness; we have heard that the Commonwealth only has limited resources or lacks the political support to aspire to anything greater. This is a shame because the Conversation has also found that there is a huge potential for the Commonwealth to play a prominent role in international affairs or, more broadly, to promote internationalism at all levels. However, realising this will require bold and ambitious action by all concerned.

- **Member states.** The official Commonwealth will only ever be as important and effective as member states want it to be. They must decide what kind of association they need the Commonwealth to be, what role they want to see it play in the 21st century and what its priorities should be. As funders who need to see results, member governments bear responsibility for adequate investment. And leaders must decide how much time and energy to devote to the Commonwealth as a policy vehicle.

“ THE TIME HAS COME FOR US ALL TO DECIDE WHAT THE COMMONWEALTH IS. UNTIL WE TAKE THAT BOLD STEP, IT WILL CONTINUE TO DWINDLE. ”

Senior Official, Pacific, Consultation Event

- **Official Commonwealth institutions.** It is quite clear that the Commonwealth needs modernisation and reform at the institutional level. With the exception of the Commonwealth of Learning (a small intergovernmental outfit focused on distance-learning based in Vancouver, that received considerable praise from those who knew it), we have heard frustrations about the way that these institutions work at every turn.

“ COMPARED TO OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS, WE HAVE SIXTY YEARS EXPERIENCE, WE HAVE A STAFF OF 300 AS OPPOSED TO THOUSANDS, YET WE ARE SO DYSFUNCTIONAL. WE OUGHT TO BE AHEAD OF THE GAME, NOT BEHIND IT. WE HAVE TO SHAKE THINGS UP. WE ARE DINOSAURS. ”

Employee of the intergovernmental Commonwealth

- **Civil Society.** Commonwealth civil society organisations also need to reform and modernise. Only a handful of the 90 or so accredited associations are active and those who are often have trouble engaging new audiences and supporters.

“ EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT THE COMMONWEALTH CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK AS THIS GREAT THING. SURE, IN PARTS IT IS. BUT TAKE A CLOSER LOOK. TOO OLD, TOO OUT OF TOUCH, TOO STAID. IF THINGS DON'T CHANGE, WE'RE IN TROUBLE. ”

Commonwealth CSO Representative, Civil Society Consultation event

The Conversation so far suggests that almost all Commonwealth organisations should modernise by:

- Getting better at profile-building
- Getting better at showing value-for-money to donors
- Improving the efficiency of their systems and processes
- Increasing the openness of how the Commonwealth works

Addressing these sorts of challenges will, in turn, require tackling other tensions that lie at the heart of the Commonwealth project. A shared history links countries and peoples that would otherwise have little to do with each other, yet that history, especially any residual imperial baggage, is an obvious constraint in establishing a contemporary relevance.

Many times during the Conversation, we have heard the Commonwealth dismissed as a 'talk shop'. This seems an unfair criticism because a great deal of the Commonwealth's appeal lies in the fact that it can bring diverse people and countries around the table to discuss difficult issues in a (usually) unthreatening forum. However, the question remains as to whether the Commonwealth is *just* a talk shop and, if so, whether its states and peoples are happy with such a situation.

Similarly, the Commonwealth is one of the best convenors in the world. Whether it is bringing leaders together for a summit or hosting conferences of professional bodies or conducting youth conferences, the Commonwealth is at its best when it seeks to bring together diverse groups of people. Yet it must be more than a convenor. In a world where flying people across the planet is becoming less acceptable and in which many other bodies play a similar role, the Commonwealth has to add some extra value.

While a great strength in many respects, the diversity of its membership is not a good enough justification for the Commonwealth's continued existence; we need to build on that diversity to do something unique and important. In this vein, the promise espoused by some people that new members would bring life to the Commonwealth strikes us as something of a red herring. It is good news, for example, that Rwanda wants to join, but its interest may have more to do with the country's geopolitical and economic positioning than with the tangible benefits that the Commonwealth can offer.

The Commonwealth cannot be sustained by the warm, fuzzy feelings evoked by a shared history, similar judicial, economic and parliamentary systems, and the common use of English: if the Commonwealth ceased to exist, all of these things would continue and thrive. They cannot be the sole basis of an international, political organisation.

So, the Commonwealth in the 21st century must be more than a talk-shop, more than a convenor and more than a family. It must face the two key challenges of agency and content: that is, how much will the Commonwealth be able to do on its own accord and how far beyond simply convening people and states will the Commonwealth go? Will the Commonwealth of the 21st century have meaningful things to say over and above what individual states might say – a voice of its own - and if so, will the Commonwealth be able to “walk the talk”?

“ THE COMMONWEALTH WAS AN ORGANISATION WHICH COULD INFLUENCE WORLD AFFAIRS BUT HAS SO FAR FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH A CLEAR AND MEANINGFUL PURPOSE ON THE 21ST CENTURY INTERNATIONAL SCENE. ”

Participant, Mauritius, Consultation Event

All this will require answering further questions. What does the Commonwealth want to be known for in the 21st century? What are the 21st century problems that the Commonwealth is going to address, effectively and uniquely? What are the ways in which the Commonwealth can work that will draw on its particular characteristics and make a unique contribution?

We hope that our report has shown *why* it is of critical importance that the whole Commonwealth family begins to talk seriously about these issues. The Commonwealth Conversation has been an exhausting process to date, but not an exhaustive one. This report is a summary of what we have found so far; it is not an end point. Rather, we hope it is a chance to take stock and reflect, especially during the various meetings that will take place at CHOGM, on what can be done to revitalise the Commonwealth.

We are keen to continue collecting views, at least until the end of 2009 so that we can feed them into our final report, due out in early 2010. We urge readers to contribute their own thoughts and to promote the Conversation through their own networks.





The Commonwealth Conversation

HOSTED BY THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

This report is a summary of the early findings of the **Commonwealth Conversation**, a global public consultation on the future of the Commonwealth launched in July 2009 by the Royal Commonwealth Society. It is a wake up call to a Commonwealth that urgently needs to raise its **profile**. If it is to become an effective international association for the 21st century, the report argues the Commonwealth must re-focus on its **principles, priorities and people**.

Published to coincide with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Trinidad and Tobago in November 2009, the report is aimed at stimulating further discussion about the future of the Commonwealth. Views and reactions can be contributed to the Commonwealth Conversation by visiting www.thecommonwealthconversation.org or contacting the address below.

The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) is the oldest and largest civil society organisation devoted to the Commonwealth. Founded in 1868, the RCS conducts a range of events and activities aimed at promoting international understanding. Headquartered at the Commonwealth Club in London, the RCS has some 5000 members in the UK and a presence in some 40 Commonwealth countries through a network of branches and Commonwealth societies.



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