

THE COMMONWEALTH CONVERSATION

Parliament Buildings, Wellington, 21 October 2009

A recent public forum in Wellington, part of the global “Commonwealth Conversation” launched in London in July, heard a wide and compelling range of views on the future of the Commonwealth.

The idea that the Commonwealth could do more and be more was continually emphasised by an array of expert speakers and audience breakout groups.

“The Commonwealth can and should make a difference”, declared one speaker, “but it’s not”.

Salient themes with suggestions, questions and discussion points that flowed from these themes from this inaugural New Zealand “Commonwealth Conversation” are outlined below.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG): the Commonwealth’s watchdog on democracy and good governance

- Are the criteria for action under CMAG’s remit, as outlined in the 1995 Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme on the Harare Declaration, clear enough?
- Should we aim for flexibility to allow values based judgements? We do not need too much prescription around triggers and processes.
- Should acts of aggression such as cross border interventions also be subject to CMAG scrutiny?
- Do we really need an institutional framework like CMAG? Could we not shift to ad hoc coalitions of Leaders who share concerns about particular developments or issues in member states? Leadership clusters can make a big difference and be very effective.
- The “Commonwealth has to be brave; it has to confront issues”. Currently sanctions imposed on errant members are not uniform nor are they applied uniformly.
- The Commonwealth lacks a consistent message on human rights.
- CMAG is not focusing on countries where there is a gradual erosion of Commonwealth values.
- Foreign Ministers meetings should be used more effectively to identify issues of concern.

Headship and Leadership

- While HRH Queen Elizabeth II remains the head of the Commonwealth it is important succession arrangements are formulated.
- We should retain the (CHOGM) Host role.
- We need to develop a new rotating Leadership position differentiated from the Host to act as the international spokesperson and Commonwealth “face” on the world stage. The position should be contestable and elected and tenure limited to a fixed period. The new Leadership role should engage on any issues of interest and encourage the formulation of Leaders’ clusters groups on topics of interest. The elected Leader should set the agenda and priorities to which the Secretariat should respond.

CHOGM and the civil fora

- CHOGM is a justifiably important and valued aspect of the modern Commonwealth.
- However there are issues, particularly what comes before and after CHOGM. There is a feeling that the CHOGM agenda and communiqué are pre-cooked behind closed doors, with no opportunity for input from citizens. The end result is a long-winded final communiqué which some consider bureaucratic and dull. It does not outline to the peoples of the Commonwealth what their Leaders discussed behind the closed doors of the CHOGM Retreat. There is a feeling of exclusion. There is also a sense that Foreign Ministers should deal with ongoing business, leaving the headline issues to the Heads of Government.
- The Peoples’ Forum has little meaningful engagement with Leaders. There may be scope to separate the timing of CHOGM away from the Youth Forum, the Business Forum and Peoples’ Forum and allow for these to take place in alternative years to enable the CHOGM to properly take account of their outputs and conclusions.
- The diffuse nature of the final communiqué and the number of standalone CHOGM statements symbolically demonstrates how the Commonwealth has lost its focus.
- For the Commonwealth to be effective it has to be more than a brand – it requires substantive change, that is, a narrower focus, a smaller agenda.

Development

- The aid model is out of date. We need to move towards a development partnership model, something that is transparent and refreshing. It needs the strategic engagement of significant partners outside the Commonwealth, such as the World Bank and the philanthropic organisations.
- The modern Commonwealth needs to become the mirror image or inverse of its historical Empire roots which were exclusivist, racist and imperialist. It should celebrate being “Safe in Diversity”.
- More support and effort is needed for the secular education of young women and girls.

Seat of the Secretariat

- Whereas the UN has an iconic location and building, the Commonwealth Secretariat is rather invisible in spite of its central London location. Marlborough House should be opened to the public and a Commonwealth visitor’s centre established. Should it be moved from London?

Commonwealth and Youth

- One of the problems currently afflicting the Commonwealth brand is its low visibility among young people.
- There are a number of ways in which the Commonwealth can achieve a greater youth profile.
- There should be a Commonwealth youth ambassador to whom young people can relate and who can raise awareness of the Commonwealth’s role on the world stage. A youth leader could perhaps play a central role in hosting a Global Commonwealth Youth Conference.
- Making Commonwealth studies a compulsory element of secondary school social studies curricula could also ensure that the Commonwealth continues to resonate with a new generation.
- Provide scholarships for the study of Commonwealth-related issues.

Commonwealth Brand

- The contemporary Commonwealth brand is toothless and the public has little awareness of the Commonwealth outside the Commonwealth Games.
- The brand is not representative of its population, especially women and children.
- We need to adopt a grass roots or ground up approach to developing the Commonwealth brand, rather than a top-down approach.
- The Commonwealth needs to nurture an identity by focusing on intra-Commonwealth people-to-people links.
- How can we personalise the Commonwealth?

Commonwealth and Global Issues

- How do we structure the Commonwealth so it makes “practical gains and stop[s] waffling.”
- While the Commonwealth occupies a unique place on the international stage with 53 members from a range of blocs (the African Union, OIC etc) does this necessarily mean that it should become engaged in the great global issues of the day?
- Can it add value to the trade agenda?
- The Commonwealth should perhaps stick to its knitting: technical support and promoting good governance. In other words, the UN should deal with global issues, and Commonwealth should focus on Commonwealth issues.

The Burden of History and the Promise of the Future

To some the Commonwealth may appear to be a colonial relic, a means through which Britain can hang on to the memory of its imperial glory. Others may see the Commonwealth as an anachronism in the 21st ‘Asian’ century. We cannot avoid the reality that the forerunner of the Commonwealth was the British Empire in which the ‘White’ dominions reaped the benefits of a close political, economic and cultural relationship with the mother country. There may

still exist a feeling that there are two Commonwealths, one white, and one non-white.

But if the Commonwealth is to have a future, it has to confront this past. The new Commonwealth has to be an “anti-empire”, entailing an acceptance of responsibility by the UK and other ‘White’ nations for real or perceived failures of the past.

CONCLUSION

The Commonwealth needs to lay its past to rest and develop a new “trust-based” platform – an enabling and empowering model with which to refresh and rebrand itself in the 21st century. The future of the Commonwealth, therefore, lies in creating a new history, not a neo-colonial history. We cannot dwell on the chequered aspects of the past: “If you can’t live with history, you can’t shape the future”.

The Commonwealth still retains some unique features. Many organisations feel safe only talking to themselves. But the Commonwealth, boasting an amazing diversity of cultures, religions and languages, is an organisation that “is safe for difference”. As we face the multiple political, religious, environmental and social challenges of the new millennium we should be mindful that a monocultural milieu is not always conducive to new ideas. It is in diversity that the peoples of the Commonwealth can find the novel solutions to today’s challenges.