



The Commonwealth in crisis – is reform possible?

Thursday 15th November 2012

Deller Hall, Senate House, University of London

Closing remarks

By

Sir Ronald Sanders KCMG

Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Member of the Round Table advisory board, and member of the 2010-11 Eminent Persons Group

I believe all will agree that this has been an extremely dynamic and thought provoking event.

In various ways all the participants have ably tackled both the statement and the Question posed by the seminar: ***The Commonwealth in crisis – is reform possible?***

One of our very respected and knowledgeable Speakers questioned whether the Commonwealth is in crisis.

The facts should speak for themselves.

Seventy per cent of the Commonwealth's Secretariat Budget is funded by only three of its members; the other 50 or so are reluctant to increase their contributions; more than 30 of the 54 member states are in arrears of their contributions; the Secretariat needs at least another £2 million per annum if it is to carry out the mandates it now has; good staff are leaving the Secretariat, and it cannot attract better personnel; a kind of North-South divide has developed in decision-making that has led to an unease in relations; there are governments that are reluctant to attend a CHOGM because of concerns over violations of Commonwealth values by the proposed host country; there is a general lack of knowledge about the Commonwealth in its member states and the majority of its governments are doing little or nothing to explain and promote it; the media consider it to be of such little relevance that it gets little coverage.

That sounds like a crisis to me – and one that it is important to confront, not deny.

It is interesting that this event coincided today with the release of the Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British House of Commons on "The Role and Future of the Commonwealth".

Anyone who has participated in today's event, and has had the opportunity to peruse the Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee would be struck by the similarity of the sentiments that they share.

Those sentiments are:

- a firm belief in the potential of the Commonwealth;
- considerable anguish over its present situation; and
- a strong conviction that it urgently needs reform before it can fulfil its potential as a unique multi-national association of governments

and people capable of making a difference to their own circumstances and contributing to the resolution of problems faced by the global community.

Let me say how pleased I am that Foreign Affairs Committee has endorsed and supported the report and recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group of which Senator Hugh Segal and I were members.

It is a sad commentary on the Commonwealth that, a year after the EPG report was discussed at Perth, even the recommendations that were accepted there are still to be implemented.

We should not mistake adoption for implementation – that is motion, not movement.

The EPG Recommendations

For me, it is a travesty that while climate change and global warming manifest themselves everyday with worrying consequences particularly for small island states the EPG's specific recommendation that "immediately after Perth", an expert group should be convened to produce a study that would identify the most vulnerable countries; identify and cost their urgent adaptation needs; and suggest ways for financing and implementation, remain to be addressed.

It is also an inexplicable curiosity that while the Doha Round of trade negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) remain stalled and in urgent need of advancement, it is claimed that the EPG recommendation to convene a meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers to explore ways in which a Commonwealth consensus might remove the log-jam, has been "overtaken by events".

Precisely what events have overtaken this recommendation has not been explained, but the Commonwealth has lost an opportunity to utilise the uniqueness of its membership to at least try to make a difference to a global situation that cries out for the kind of common approach that the Commonwealth's diverse membership can bring.

CMAG and the SG'S Good Offices

On the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and the Secretary-General's Good Offices role, there is no doubt that the expanded mandate that CMAG itself recommended is a long overdue step in the right direction.

It is a most welcome decision to include among the triggers for CMAG action, recommendations by the Secretary-General on issues such as:

- The unilateral abrogation of a democratic constitution or serious threats to constitutional rule;
- The postponement of national elections without constitutional or other reasonable justification;
- The systematic denial of political space, such as through detention of political leaders or restriction of freedom of association, assembly or expression.

But, in its self-reform process, CMAG showed itself to be more concerned that it should protect itself from being seen as “a punitive body”, than with refining its system and capacity for dealing with serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth values.

I suspect in the view of many Commonwealth observers this is the fundamental weakness of CMAG – a resistance of the very role for which it was devised, and that is, to be a body that applies appropriate penalties to those states that persistently or seriously violate the values for which all Commonwealth member states claim to stand.

The enhanced role of the Secretary-General in addressing serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth values, other than the unconstitutional overthrow of a democratically-elected government, and acting to help such a government to restore Commonwealth values, is also a welcome development.

But a line has to be drawn between giving a country time to institute restorative measures that can be gauged, and simply biding time to keep countries in the Commonwealth at all costs.

If there is too much of the latter and not enough of the former, the Commonwealth association and its capacity to be an influence for good will be lost.

It also has to be said that this new mandate to CMAG and the Secretary-General’s good offices could quickly become a point of greater criticism of them both, unless they are seen and heard to be addressing clear violations.

The Secretariat – led by the Secretary-General – should be actively shaping the consensus of Commonwealth member states and raising the bar around upholding the values of the Commonwealth.

That is why in the EPG report, we stated clearly that “silence is not an option”, and we recommended that “the Secretary-General, as the voice of the commonwealth, and as a leader on behalf of the organisation, should have the freedom, autonomy and responsibility to speak out publicly in defence of Commonwealth values”.

What is certain is that there is no effective system in place to give early warning of problems in member states on the basis of “well researched and reliable information” on “serious or persistent violations” of democracy, the rule of law and human rights in member states.

Filling that gap was one of the reasons that the EPG recommended a Commissioner for Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights.

We all know that the EPG recommendation for a Commissioner was rejected by a number of governments.

I am heartened by the discussion here today that still sees value in the recommendation. And, I am glad of the observation in the Foreign Affairs Committee Report that “the intention behind the recommendation for a Commissioner is an important one, and goes to the heart of what the Commonwealth is about”.

We all had continued to hope that a mechanism would emerge that in the words of the Committee report reflects “the EPG’s recommendation that the Commissioner should provide “well researched and reliable information” on “serious or persistent violations of democracy, the rule of law and human rights in member states,” and “indicate approaches for remedial action.”

I was saddened to hear from the Secretariat representative today that “the examination of possible options by CMAG and the Secretary-General had not produced consensus on any such mechanism and, to be honest, such consensus is not in sight”.

The Commonwealth Charter

I should also say a word about the Charter for the Commonwealth.

This was, as you know, a recommendation of the EPG, proposed in the first place by our respected Chairman, Tun Abdullah Badawi, a former Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The concept has now been accepted by Foreign Ministers and the content of the Charter has been created by officials and transmitted to Heads of Government for approval.

But, whether the Charter as devised by officials, will, in any way enhance the Commonwealth is another matter.

The Commonwealth is not a treaty organisation and the Charter cannot and will not bind member countries any more than any of the many declarations by Heads of Government have bound any of them.

In making its recommendation for a Charter, the EPG knew that very well.

We felt that the only way that a Charter would bring value to the Commonwealth is if, as we said in our Report, it was “a People’s Charter” – one that resulted from “wide consultation about its content and formulation within each Commonwealth country”.

We said that “the Commonwealth-wide process of discussing the proposed Charter among the many civil society organisations, in schools, universities and in town-hall meetings could itself serve to renew and invigorate interest in, and commitment to, the Commonwealth. It would also source the values and aspirations in the will of the peoples of the Commonwealth”.

As it turned out, as far as I am aware, such narrow consultation as occurred was limited to three of the fifty-four member states of the Commonwealth, although to its credit the Secretariat did open a page on its website to receive views and opinions.

By failing to hold public consultations at the national level, Commonwealth governments lost a golden opportunity to renew interest in and knowledge of the Commonwealth and to ground the Charter in the aspirations of the people.

Commonwealth Strategic Plan

On the matter of the Strategic Plan for the Commonwealth Secretariat, it was encouraging for us to hear from representatives of the institution about progress in devising these plans and implementing them.

It was also good to hear that the institutions would be focussing plans on projects and programmes that would have impact and deliver results.

“Impact” and “results” were two huge concerns of the EPG.

We were well aware of two considerations.

The first was that, with austerity measures being implemented by every government over its national spending, it was well-nigh impossible that they would agree to give the Secretariat and the Foundation more money at this time.

The second was that the Secretariat had been given far too many mandates by Ministers without the necessary financial resources to deliver.

In any event, some of the programmes and projects delivered few meaningful results and had too miniscule an impact because the financial resources available were simply too small.

It was for that reason that we proposed that the Secretariat should retire: (a) work that enjoys no specific Commonwealth advantage; (b) work that could be better done by organisations with far greater resources; and (c) work that has demonstrated no particular impact.

Much better, we thought, that the Secretariat’s operations should be revised to focus on the work that the Commonwealth could do best and make them a priority.

That work should include: (a) advocacy for small states in the international community; (b) helping developing countries to manage debt; (c) establishing machinery for facilitating trade; (d) preparing plans for Commonwealth food security; (e) coping with Climate Change and Global warming; (f) developing and strengthening institutions to uphold Commonwealth values; (g) establishing partnerships with other Commonwealth organisations and international bodies to deliver goods the Secretariat cannot do alone; and (h) reaching consensus on issues that are global and in which the Commonwealth can take a leading role.

The EPG had expressed the desire to see the strategic plan completed by and approved May this year in order to begin implementation by January 1st 2013.

From what we have learned today, it seems that the new strategic plan will not come into force until July of next year.

Again, this is an unfortunate state of affairs, particularly as it has come about because of suspicion and mistrust among Commonwealth governments, and a false argument has developed in the shadows about whether democracy is being demanded at the price of development.

The bulk of the Commonwealth's resources is spent on development matters, not democracy and it is times that the contrary argument is nipped in the bud.

Even if in the new Strategic Plan the number of areas related to development is reduced, development still receives the large majority of Commonwealth financing.

It is up to the member governments to reach consensus on the development priorities; the Secretariat simply does not have enough money to deliver all that it is asked to do.

Strong leadership is required to build consensus around the reality that for the Commonwealth to be a credible in the delivery of development goods, and in the advocacy of the interests of its developing states, it has to be credible in its commitment to the values for which it stands.

It is not one or the other – the two are intricately intertwined.

Renewal and Reform

We end this evening where we started this morning – the challenge ahead in reforming and renewing the Commonwealth so that it can fulfil a unique role that is born of its commonality in diversity.

Today the Commonwealth exists in a world of many multinational and international organisations.

Every Commonwealth member belongs to organisations other than the Commonwealth. Some of them deliver trade, others aid, yet others security.

But, I venture to suggest that among all those organisations, the Commonwealth is unique and special to the majority of its members, because it has a glue that is born of traditions, language, laws, sport, and history – in short a special familiarity that distinguishes their association

and makes it possible for them to reach consensus in ways that they are unable to do in other organisations.

The Commonwealth represents so many and so much that in a world of rapidly changing economic circumstances, religious suspicion and intolerance, unprecedented threats to peace and security, a surge for democracy and human rights, it is needed vitally.

Reform and renewal are both necessary and possible, particularly to re-establish trust among Commonwealth governments and to rebuild confidence in the delivery mechanisms of the Secretariat.

What is required is leadership and resolve.

(ends)