

Address by Stuart Mole, Director-General Royal Commonwealth Society

The Commonwealth and its Member Governments: Unlocking the Potential

Stuart Mole focused his address on the role of Governments in the Commonwealth. Although friends of the Commonwealth in civil society no doubt felt that the People's Commonwealth was in a healthy state, was the same true of Governments? The Commonwealth was, after all mainly inter-governmental in character.

He addressed three main questions

- Do governments believe in the Commonwealth?
- If they do believe in it, why are they not more engaged with it?
- What can be done to unlock the Commonwealth's potential?

Do Governments believe in the Commonwealth?

One way to measure this was to look countries' interest in membership. Many countries that might be regarded as being on the margins of eligibility for membership were interested in joining. Mozambique might have been so regarded when it joined and had proved to be a model member. Rwanda had expressed confidence that it might be admitted at the Kampala summit in November. Even Algeria had on one occasion raised the issue of potential membership with the Secretary-General.

It should also be noted that countries like South Africa, Nigeria, Pakistan and Fiji had all at different times rejoined the Commonwealth after periods spent outside the 'club'. Some countries – he mentioned Malaysia in particular had gone through an explicit and rigorous examination of the benefits to themselves of continued membership and had opted to belong.

Priority considerations regarding membership would vary from country to country. But one should beware of taking too cynical a view of countries' Commonwealth commitment. Not every country shared the jaundiced views that sometimes characterised the attitude in London. This was evident in the number of Commonwealth Clubs in parts of West Africa or the recent response from Ugandan schools to the Commonwealth Essay Competition for which they submitted 35,000 entries!

Why are governments not more engaged?

A first consideration was that the Commonwealth was an 'organisation of option' rather than an 'organisation of obligation', unlike the United Nations or most regional bodies where the subscription level was mandatory. In UK's case this resulted in annual payments per head of population of £52 to the EU, £10 to the UN, £2 to NATO, a mere 18p to the Commonwealth. This left the Commonwealth on a shoestring budget and prevented it from having a more significant impact.

Second, Governments tended to look at the Commonwealth in selfish terms of tangible benefit to their national interest rather than the collective good. Malaysia had seen the benefit of hosting the 1989 CHOGM and the Commonwealth Games: Rwanda saw Commonwealth

membership largely in terms of co-operation in the Great Lakes region of Africa and its relations with Uganda. Even for a developed country like Canada, its interest in Commonwealth membership was related to its own situation as a country bridging the language and cultural divide between 'anglophonie' and 'francophonie'.

Third, a lukewarm attitude to the Commonwealth might stem in part from Commonwealth failures. The Commonwealth had many much-vaunted successes in resolving conflicts, but the examples of Kashmir, Zimbabwe, Fiji showed Commonwealth efforts had sometimes failed.

Fourth, in periods of its history the Commonwealth had suffered from a lack of leadership. Who today, for example, was filling the shoes of Kenneth Kaunda, Lee Kwan Yew or Mandela? Was the failure of Thabo Mbeki to attend the opening of Commonwealth Education Ministers Conference in Cape Town, even when he was in the same city, significant? Where were the illustrious names putting forward their candidacy to succeed Don McKinnon as Commonwealth Secretary-General?

What could be done to unlock the Commonwealth's potential?

1. Leadership. The Commonwealth required strong leadership. It should be proactive in seeking out a strong candidate as the next Secretary-general regardless of geographical origin. The principle of regional rotation of the Secretary-General's post should not override the need to identify a leader of stature. In terms of member states, one had to look for a new impetus to come from countries like Nigeria, Malaysia, India and South Africa – it was particularly encouraging that India was putting in more resources to various Commonwealth programmes.
2. Expanded membership. The Commonwealth would benefit from the reinvigoration that new recruits might bring. A Commission under P. J. Patterson (former Jamaican PM) was considering the question of candidates for membership. If the Republic of Ireland were to join, as had nearly happened before, that would impart a welcome dynamic.
3. Political action in UK. Friends of the Commonwealth should engage with politicians more. There was a storehouse of goodwill for the Commonwealth to be exploited. The changes of leadership in the main parties offered new opportunities – Gordon Brown's speeches were peppered with references to the Commonwealth and David Cameron also seemed open to suggestions. There was an opportunity for friends of the Commonwealth in civil society to put together a 'Commonwealth manifesto' with a raft of new ideas for political follow-up action.

Finally Stuart Mole identified a number of key areas where Commonwealth preoccupations and messages were likely to move centre-stage in the concerns of the coming age, including

- A recognition of the value and necessity of multilateral approaches to global problems like climate change
- New emphases on the conflict resolution, peace-keeping and peace-building
- Engaging the sympathies of young people with messages about co-operation, adherence to key principles, informality, recognising multiple identities
- The respect and understanding agenda being addressed by Amartya Sen's Commission
- The role of civil society
- A more prominent role in the world's economic and political system to be played by Commonwealth states with dynamic economies like India, Malaysia and others.

Above all, imagination and vision were needed to make the Commonwealth a more potent force for good in the world.

Points made in ensuing discussion

Stuart Mole's address gave rise to animated discussion and some of the points raised were:

- Lord Triesman, the UK Minister for Africa, is a warm supporter of the CW. Should CEC invite him to speak some time?
- However FCO sometimes gives impression of being the anti-Commonwealth Office
- Ignorance and lack of information are as much the problem as neglect and hostility
- Too many young people think of CW only as a matter of history and colonial past
- RCS updated its Schools' Pack on the CW each year but its 'reach' was limited
- When we talk of UK attitudes to CW we often subconsciously refer to London attitudes. But Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh don't necessarily see things in same light. We need to mobilise whole of UK in support of CW not just England
- Key role of Queen as Head of CW. Could liaison with Palace lead to productive initiatives from HM?
- CEC proposals to celebrate Independence anniversaries and achievements of key CW states is a good way to raise CW profile.
- Could/should CW civil society organisations work more purposefully together through a collective organisation? Is their influence too diffuse?
- Diaspora groups should be potential allies in promoting CW. Should CW organisations work more with them and enlist their interest/help, given that it is CW links that have helped them migrate. They contain wealthy as well as poor members and many of them, if of CW origin also have a UK vote, making them 'interesting' to politicians.
- While ComSec understandably reluctant to get involved with a 'CW manifesto' aimed at leadership in UK, it is less understandably passive in producing promotional material about CW and in these circumstances it's not clear where lead will be taken.
- New ComSec staff need an induction programme on CW and perhaps civil society organisations should collectively organise one. An initiative is also needed to ensure that ComSec staff on in-country missions spend a day or so on information/promotional activities about the CW
- CW is only organisation with mechanism and courage to suspend countries from membership when they infringe basic rights: it should be proud of CEMAG
- Need to stress values of multilateralism. Govts seem little interested in CW infrastructure and collective organisations. UK Ministers (Benn, Rammell etc) seem deaf to pleas to work through CW to get their international work done – thus UK giving more support to CW through CSFP than through ComSec/CFTC/COL
- CW connections sometimes evident in collaborative approach by CW states in international negotiations e.g. with EU or ILO
- World Bank has learned to respect CW efforts in addressing vulnerability of CW small states. But as Wolfensohn pointed out in his CW lecture 2 years back, ComSec budget including CFTC is less than that of a single Bank Department.