

Can Malta rescue the Commonwealth?

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Transcript of an after-dinner presentation given by [Sir Ronald Sanders](#) on 9 January 2014 at the Round Table Post-CHOGM Conference, Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

All but those in denial admit that the Commonwealth is now a wounded organisation. It is facing questions related not only to its meaning, but also to its existence.

Over the next two years, the Commonwealth can mark time sleepwalking into irrelevance or it can make use of the present existential threat to prepare the ground for a substantial and meaningful re-launch at the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malta.

A successful re-launch of the Commonwealth will require extensive preparation with the fullest possible participation of the Maltese Prime Minister, who will chair the 2015 CHOGM and be responsible for its outcomes.

It is with this matter that my presentation will be essentially concerned.

But, we cannot contemplate the future without examining the past – in particular the most recent past that has brought the Commonwealth to its present state.

The Commonwealth has lost importance and relevance to Heads of Government

Significantly, the Commonwealth seems to have lost importance and relevance to Heads of Government.

Evidence of this is the increasingly low attendance at CHOGMs by Heads of Government themselves.

To some degree, poor attendance by Heads may be a consequence of holding Foreign Ministers meetings as part of CHOGMs, and assigning the agenda of the Heads of Government Meeting for review by Foreign Ministers.

It may well be that given this role of Foreign Ministers – which started only in recent years – many Heads of Government see little compulsion to attend.

In this regard, the importance and worth of Heads of Government Meetings may well have been degraded by the associated Foreign Ministers meeting, causing the Commonwealth to lose its most

valuable characteristic: Heads of Government collectively and *by themselves alone* engaging in frank dialogue to reach agreement on common causes that they could advance together in their own countries and in the international community on a Commonwealth platform.

Differences in the Commonwealth now pronounced

Differences between Commonwealth countries are now gravely pronounced.

Regrettably, the main issue is a debate over upholding values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law over the needs of development.

Curiously, the debate is being framed by some developing countries as one in which “white” Commonwealth countries are pressing for good governance and values at the expense of development.

But, the evidence is clear that the bulk of Commonwealth resources is spent on development and only a small portion is dedicated to democracy.

From last year’s combined budgets of the Secretariat and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC), £14.3 million was spent on development and £2.7 on democracy.

More significantly, almost 70 per cent of the total budgets came from the “white” Commonwealth.

In reality, therefore, the debate framed as the “white” Commonwealth pressing for democracy at the expense of development is false.

It is important to note that – contrary to the insistence of representatives of some developing countries that “development” is their priority and it must precede democratic concerns – some of the most radical, leading thinkers of the Commonwealth developing world have long argued, based on careful and informed study, that development cannot be separated from democracy.

These leaders from the South include Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Manmohan Singh (India), Michael Manley (Jamaica), Shridath Ramphal (Guyana), Gamani Corea (Sri Lanka), Abdus Salam (Pakistan) and Simba Makoni (Zimbabwe). They concluded, in the comprehensive review of the International Economic Order from the perspective of the South, that:

*In the final analysis, the South’s plea for justice, equity and democracy in the global society cannot be disassociated from its pursuit of these goals within its own societies. Commitment to democratic values, respect for fundamental human rights – particularly the right to dissent – fair treatment for minorities, concern for the poor and underprivileged, probity in public life, willingness to settle disputes without recourse to war – all these cannot but influence world opinion and increase the South’s chances of securing a new world order.*ⁱⁱ

In the event, there is no question that, over the years, the collective Commonwealth has put its money where its mouth is in relation to its development responsibilities to the Commonwealth people.

Of course, more could be done and should be done. But the good ought not to be discarded for the perfect, nor should any government, in trying to get more resources for development matters, reject the importance of democracy without which development will not occur in their countries on a sustainable basis.

By the same token, too great a focus on maintaining values without additional resources will make it very difficult for the Secretariat and CFTC to be sustained as beneficial organisations.

Ideally, an emphasis on core Commonwealth values should be backed by good on-the-ground and advocacy-related work.

To do so, the resources that governments provide to the Secretariat and CFTC have to be paid and should be increased.

If they are not, the very existence of the Commonwealth will be imperilled – as indeed it is in danger now.

The decision by the government of Canada to withhold its voluntary contributions to the Commonwealth Secretariat and to the Fund is no small matter – the voluntary contribution is significant.

Additionally, Canada has been a committed member of the Commonwealth that has joined its voice to every major issue the Commonwealth has collectively faced, from telling Apartheid South Africa that its policies had no place in a Commonwealth of values in the 1960s, to standing against the obduracy of the British Government's reluctance to apply sanctions against Apartheid South Africa in the 1990s.

Every effort should be made to repair the relationship between Canada and the Commonwealth.

Britain – the largest economy in the Commonwealth – must also be encouraged to revise its recent decision to limit its contributions to the Fund only to its statutory requirements, or this association which is sprung from its loins; whose headquarters are located in its capital; and whose Sovereign is its Head, will limp into oblivion.

Other member states whose economies have grown in recent years – and who are beneficiaries of Commonwealth membership – should also give greater support to the organisation than they have in the past.

The total Budget last year was £16.14 million.

It is worth recalling that 65.06 per cent of the Secretariat's Budget is met by Britain, Canada and Australia alone.

Britain pays 32.06 per cent, Canada 20.08 per cent and Australia 12.18 per cent.

Of the remaining 34.94 per cent, the highest contributors are India at 4.03 per cent, New Zealand, South Africa and Singapore at 2.73 per cent, Malaysia at 1.61 per cent and Nigeria at 1.37 per cent.

The majority of the other countries pay less than 1 per cent.

For instance, The Gambia, which withdrew from the Commonwealth just before the Colombo CHOGM, was allocated only 0.20 per cent of the total Budget, or £32,232.

The size of the Commonwealth's Budget is a real constraint if the Secretariat is to attract quality staff and deliver on the several mandates expected of it.

If the Commonwealth is to mean something, governments cannot be mean with the Commonwealth.

The issue requires urgent attention.

Balance urgently required

All this – the North-South divisions, fears and grievances that have developed within the Commonwealth – is a matter requiring management and leadership to achieve balance – balance which could be accomplished by rational discussion in a spirit of compromise and consensus that has been the hallmark of every successful Commonwealth venture and initiative.

It is this spirit that is disappearing from the Commonwealth discourse and that urgently requires rebuilding and re-establishment.

The association now urgently needs the “touch of healing” that India's Jawaharlal Nehru regarded as one of its most important characteristics.

Different perceptions about the comparative importance of democracy and development now dominate the unspoken agenda of the Commonwealth.

It has become part of a North-South split that casts a long shadow over the Commonwealth, and threatens the meaning and effectiveness of the organisation.

For sure, North-South issues have arisen in the Commonwealth in the past, but they have been used as occasions for constructive and productive dialogue from which were distilled common ground and common objectives to be pursued as a shared Commonwealth agenda.

It is important to note that the struggle to end racism in Southern Africa – including the termination of white minority rule in Southern Rhodesia and the elimination of apartheid in South Africa – was not a North-South issue.

Within the Commonwealth, there was disagreement with the stance of the British government, but that disagreement came as much from countries of the North, such as Australia and Canada, as it did from countries of the South, such as Zambia and Tanzania.

The Colombo CHOGM did not succeed even in trying to paper over the deep cracks that have developed in the association.

Of the Commonwealth's 53 Heads of Government, only 26 – including the host President Mahinda Rajapaska – attended.

The 'Retreat' – conceived in 1973 as a private meeting of Heads of Government only, and regarded since then as the heart and brain of the Commonwealth association – was even less well attended.

It was dominated by Ministers and officials providing no opportunity for free and frank discussions between Heads of Government only.

If ever there was a CHOGM that needed to focus on healing rifts, clearing-up misunderstandings and finding consensus on an agenda that Commonwealth countries could take forward jointly, the 2013 Summit was it.

But no dialogue on these corrosive problems took place in Colombo.

Similarly, there was no discourse on other existential and distinguishing issues that confront the Commonwealth – among them: managing the Commonwealth's diversity, and restoring the centrality of CHOGMs as a "Heads only" meeting.

Over the years, there has been an assumption that the Commonwealth comprises states that naturally cling together, sharing common interests and aspirations.

But, the Commonwealth is now an association of 53 nations.

If the diversity of the Commonwealth member states in their economic ambitions and their political aspirations is not managed to create mutual understanding and goodwill and to pursue shared goals, it is their differences and divergences that will prevail.

What has not attended greater diversity in the Commonwealth is careful management of the divisions that it has created.

It was its 'intimacy within diversity' that gave the Commonwealth the opportunity to make a difference –particularly at Heads of Government Meetings.

And, while "intimacy" does not imply harmony, it did provide for empathy and appreciation and, in most cases, turned contention to consensus.

It is that intimacy of CHOGMs that has been lost – largely by surrendering space to bureaucracy.

The 'club' is not the intimate place it was, and meetings no longer provide the opportunity for leaders to get to know one another; to appreciate each other's difficulties; and to seek ways of co-operation and collaboration.

These were the special characteristics of the Commonwealth.

They are what made the association unique and gave it the capacity to build consensus out of the diverse interests of its member states.

That is why management of the Commonwealth's diversity is vital and a 'Heads Only' Retreat is an essential tool.

Otherwise, the Commonwealth will be nothing more than any other multilateral or international organisation in which North-South animosity predominates in every discourse, intensifying division.

The association will continue to drift away from the goodwill and trust that were the beneficial offshoots of its evolution.

Alternatively, it could be rejuvenated and reinvigorated to play a beneficial role for its member States and the international community – as it has done in the past.

An Initiative to re-launch the Commonwealth

If Commonwealth governments truly believe that the Commonwealth association has worth and merit, an initiative should be taken to define the organisation in the modern world; agree a practical and achievable set of objectives for its future; settle a structure for its management; and agree a realistic budget.

In this regard, the Prime Minister of Malta, as the Chair of the next CHOGM in 2015, might consider taking the initiative to prepare the ground for a re-launch of the Commonwealth.

To begin the preparation, a small group should be appointed to map out a meaning and purpose for the Commonwealth; to address a realistic and practical work programme for the Secretariat; to assess funding requirements and adequate contributions from all member states; and to suggest a methodology for electing a Secretary-General at the conclusion of the current Secretary-General's term of office.

The group should also address the issues of how to keep the Commonwealth cohesive and relevant to Heads of Government.

Enough studies exist, including the 2011 Report of the EPG on urgent reform of the Commonwealth, for a small team of Commonwealth experts to formulate a short paper for a one-day discussion by Heads of Government representing each region of the Commonwealth with a view to making recommendations to all of their colleagues at the Malta 2015 CHOGM.

This special one-day meeting of regional Heads should not be delegated to Ministers – it should be a Heads *only* meeting, and if any selected regional Head of Government is unable to attend, he/she should be replaced by another Head of Government from the relevant region.

The entire process should be the work of the Maltese Prime Minister, since it will be his responsibility to chair the 2015 CHOGM and to deliver its outcomes.

The Next Secretary-General

At CHOGM 2015 a vitally important task before Heads of Government will be to elect a new Secretary-General. Already, discussions have begun amongst Commonwealth-interest groups and Academics about the position.

Several suggestions have been made about the qualities needed in the person who would fill the post, and how the methodology for electing the Secretary-General should be changed.^[ii]

Among some governments, the discussion has centred on which Commonwealth region's turn it is to get the position.

An objective analysis of that inquiry produces the following facts. The Secretary-Generalship has been held as follows: 1965-1975 Canada (10 years), 1975-1990 the Caribbean (15 years), 1990 – 2000 Africa (10 years), 2000-2008 the Pacific (8 years), 2008 until April 2016 Asia (8 years).

If it is the 'turn' of any region, it should be the Mediterranean – either Malta or Cyprus – to put up a Candidate for election in 2015 and then, if the notion of a 'turn' persists, it should return to Canada in 2023.

But, indeed, the notion of regional 'turns' is a contrivance of recent vintage and not a concept ever envisaged for the post.

When Arnold Smith of Canada was elected by Heads of Government in 1965, there was no question of a 'turn', and when Shridath Ramphal replaced him in 1975, the idea that it was the turn of another region never arose – the two men were elected unanimously as the best persons for the job.

When Emeka Anyoku was elected in 1990, the former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser was also a candidate; in 2000, Heads of Government chose Don McKinnon over Farook Sobhan (Bangladesh) and in 2008, they elected Kamallesh Sharma instead of Michael Frendo (Malta).

In none of these elections did any region have the exclusive right to put up a candidate for the job.

At any rate, the Commonwealth now requires the best person that it can get for the job, drawing from every country of the Commonwealth and not restricting itself to any one country or region.

The person elected has not only to be a firm believer in the Commonwealth; he/she has to have a vision for the organisation's role for its member States and for the part it can play in global affairs.

He/she also has to have the capacity to advise Heads of Government prudently but fearlessly; to heal rifts between governments; and to find and promote common ground to advance the Commonwealth. Respected leadership in a re-launched Commonwealth will be integral to its success.

Finding the right person cannot be left to the chance of regional 'turns'.

In this regard, one of the actions that the special one-day meeting of regional Heads of Government that I have proposed here might take is to initiate a search throughout the Commonwealth for a shortlist of appropriate candidates.

The vital Importance of CHOGM being a meeting of Heads

Finally, and of overwhelming importance to the re-launching of the Commonwealth, is to recognise that its great success in the past emanated from CHOGMs that were fully and regularly attended by Heads of Government, and by the relationships they developed amongst themselves and with the Secretary-General as the Chief Executive Officer of the organisation.

Over the years, as I have said, this vital mechanism of a CHOGM attended by Heads of Government has been eroded – only a little more than half of the Heads turned up in Perth in 2011, and even fewer at Colombo in 2013.

This is because the practice evolved of allowing Ministers and Officials not only to participate in CHOGMs instead of Heads, but to allow them to speak at Executive Sessions and to attend Retreats.

The ‘Club’ of Commonwealth Heads is no longer special, and no longer provides the private and intimate environment in which they can speak frankly.

CHOGM and its ‘Retreat’ were the Commonwealth’s very special mechanisms that set it apart from any other multilateral or international grouping; that gave it real and tangible meaning to each Head of Government.

The empathy, appreciation and understanding that resulted from those intimate and unreported discussions were the essence of the Commonwealth’s cohesion and the substance of inter-governmental co-operation.

It is time now for a new set of rules to be established, such that only Heads of Government can attend retreats; meetings of Foreign Ministers are held separately and apart from CHOGM; at Executive Sessions of CHOGM, ministers may speak where a Head is unable to attend but not on parity with Heads; and officials should not catch the Chairman’s eye.

At all costs, CHOGMs should be restored to Heads of Government only.

Conclusion

If the Commonwealth is to rise above the bickering and disagreements that have eroded its standing; if it is to give significance to its existence and be imbued with renewed vigour; if it is to deliver value to its people, it is Heads of Government that must re-energise it.

Heads of Government have to give real and measurable commitment to the values for which the Commonwealth says it stands, while at the same time restoring trust and confidence between themselves and with the Secretariat.

Such trust, such confidence, such understanding and belief will not emerge by themselves, nor should they be presumed to exist.

They require constant vigilance, promotion and advocacy by those who lead Commonwealth nations and those, such as the Secretary-General, who are charged with the Commonwealth's fulltime stewardship.

Failing this, the Commonwealth may well go over the cliff to disintegration on which it is now dangerously perched.

The Heads of Government Meeting in Malta in 2015 can rescue the Commonwealth if the necessary preparatory work is undertaken.

[i] The Challenge to the South: The Report of the South Commission, Oxford University Press, 1990, p.287

[ii] Selecting the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Stuart Mole and Daisy Cooper, Policy Briefing: Issues before Commonwealth leaders at Perth, Australia in October 2011, pp 29-34, Published for the CA/B by Nexus Strategic Partnerships, 2011