

The Modern Commonwealth: Its relevance to St Vincent and the Grenadines- a Small Island Developing State

A Public Discourse celebrating the Commonwealth in the Diamond Jubilee Year of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Head of the Commonwealth

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In St Vincent and the Grenadines

At the invitation of

His Excellency Sir Frederick Ballantyne GCMG

Governor-General

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Your Excellency the Governor-General Sir Frederick Ballantyne

Your Ladyship Justice Gertel Thom

Excellencies

Members of this distinguished audience

When I received the kind invitation of the Governor-General, Sir Frederick Ballantyne, to speak here this evening, I accepted it with alacrity and with great pleasure.

St Vincent and the Grenadines is a country with which I have had an association of one pleasing kind or another going back to the days when I had need of a hair brush and it did not take me as long as it does now to wash my face.

I accepted the invitation not only because it was a welcome opportunity to visit your vibrant country again, but also because it was a chance to explore with you a most important topic: “The Modern Commonwealth: Its relevance to St Vincent and the Grenadines – a Small Island Developing State”.

The modern Commonwealth what is it?

It has been said of the Commonwealth that if it did not already exist, it should be invented, particularly in the troubling times in which our world now exists.

It is a voluntary association of 54 countries and 2.1 billion people.

These countries are located on every continent of the world.

They are rich countries, poor countries, large countries, medium-sized countries, small countries and micro-states.

The people are of every race.

They represent every religion in the world.

It is difficult to imagine how, in the manifold power-struggles, economic competition, and divisive influences of today's disparate world, it would be possible to forge a cohesive association from among such diverse people with such differing interests.

In this connection, the Commonwealth is a gift – a gift not only to its own peoples, but also to the global community.

It is an example of how a Muslim can sit with a Christian in an atmosphere of acceptance; of how representatives of the rich can commune with representatives of the poor in a climate of co-operation; of how white people and black people can seek shared ways to tackle common problems that know no colour.

The world today has need of the Commonwealth.

A former Secretary-General, the Caribbean's own Sir Shridath Ramphal, used to say that: "The Commonwealth cannot negotiate for the world, but it can help the world to negotiate".

However, that observation – very evident up to the 1990's – will only remain valid if the Commonwealth is reformed.

The Commonwealth has never become a treaty organisation and its decisions – made by consensus – are not legally binding on its member states.

But, unlike any other international grouping of nations, the Commonwealth claims to be a 'values-based' organisation, built on pillars of democracy and development and adhering to principles of good governance, human rights, and the right to economic advancement.

Therefore, unlike other international organisations, high standards are applied when measuring the effectiveness and worth of the Commonwealth.

The standards have been set by Heads of Government of the member states in several declarations starting in 1971 in Singapore with *The Declaration of Commonwealth Principles* and culminating so far in 2009 in Trinidad and Tobago with *The Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles*.

When commitments are made, the expectation is that governments will honour them, maintain them, and implement them as the common rules of their association with each other, and as a shining example of what the rest of the world could accomplish.

In recent time, it is the departure from Commonwealth declared values by some governments, and the failure of the Commonwealth collectively to speak out when serious infractions occur, that have raised questions about the Commonwealth's effectiveness and, therefore, its relevance.

I shall return to this point later in this presentation.

Suffice to say that the Commonwealth has embarked upon a programme of reform that could restore its moral authority for its member states and in the world.

For now, I turn to the role of Her Majesty The Queen, as Head of the Commonwealth, in this her Diamond Jubilee Year.

The Commonwealth and the role of its Head in her Jubilee Year

On April 28th, the modern Commonwealth will be 63 years old.

For all but three of those years, Queen Elizabeth II has been its Head.

It is pertinent that we should recall how that came about, and what impact it has on the member-states of the Commonwealth.

In 1949, the British Commonwealth – as it then was – comprised nine members.

Eight of them were Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan and Ceylon (now called SriLanka) which all remain members of the Commonwealth.

The ninth member was Ireland: known today as the Republic of Ireland.

Ireland chose to become a Republic just 10 days before a Commonwealth Summit was scheduled to be held in April 1949.

The government of Ireland could not see how it could become a Republic with its own Head of State and remain in the Commonwealth, so it announced its withdrawal.

The same issue bedevilled the thinking in India, which had become independent in 1947, and whose government had decided that the country should become a Republic with an Indian President as Head of State.

Showing admirable flexibility and creativity, the eight remaining Heads of Government including the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, decided at that April 1949 Summit that there should be no incompatibility between a country being a Republic and a member of the Commonwealth.

In what was a remarkable demonstration not only of good sense, but also a desire to keep the Commonwealth together, the Indian Government affirmed India's desire "to continue full membership of the Commonwealth" and accepted the (then) King as "the symbol of the free association of its independent member nations and as such the Head of the Commonwealth".

On that basis, every new member of the Commonwealth since 1949 – whether it became a Republic or not - has accepted the British Crown as Head of the Commonwealth.

The decision of the 1949 Commonwealth Summit that Republican status is not incompatible with Commonwealth membership is germane to the recent announcement by the Prime Minister of Jamaica, Portia Simpson-Miller, that she would like to see Jamaica become a Republic.

Should the Jamaican people decide by a constitutional process to become a Republic, it would not be an innovation in the Caribbean.

Three other Commonwealth Caribbean countries are already Republics.

Those countries are Dominica, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, all of which enjoy full and equal membership of the Commonwealth.

Choosing to become a Republic is entirely a matter of whether or not the overwhelming majority of people of each of the states of the Caribbean conclude that it is no longer reasonable that the Head of State should

reside in a distant country and not even be a citizen of the Caribbean country of which she or he is Head.

These are questions of both a practical and national nature.

They are linked to concepts of national pride, national symbolism and indeed of nationhood itself.

It is my suspicion that Commonwealth Caribbean countries will, at the appropriate time, each move to Republican status whether they do so with an Executive President as in Guyana or a titular President as in Dominica.

It would be far better of course, if we were to have a single Republic of the United States of the Caribbean, or at least, of the countries that now form the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States.

But that is another matter and one whose consummation is still devoutly to be wished.

As it stands now, The Queen is the Head of a Commonwealth, the majority of whose members – 38 of the 54 – are Republics.

In the 60 years in which she has stood at the Commonwealth helm, the association has had no more passionate a Champion and no more ardent an advocate.

She has seen the Commonwealth grow from eight member countries to fifty-four, and three of them Cameroon, Mozambique and Rwanda were not English-speaking former British colonies.

Apart from the fact that she has sought every opportunity to promote the Commonwealth avidly, Commonwealth High Commissioners take precedence at her Court in London over all other Ambassadors - something that has puzzled and often irked representatives of large and powerful countries such as the US, Russia, France and Germany.

Importantly, she has steadfastly attended every Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting even in the face of advice from the British Government that she should not do so.

The most famous of these occasions being the 1979 Commonwealth Summit in Zambia when opposition to the dictatorial and racist regime of Ian Smith in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) had become intense, except within the British government itself.

The Queen has studiously kept her role as Head of the Commonwealth completely separate from her role as the Sovereign of 16 individual countries including Britain and St Vincent and the Grenadines.

As Head of the Commonwealth, she has given great respect to Heads of State and Government of Commonwealth countries and they have returned it in equal measure.

By every objective measure, she has fulfilled her role as the symbol of Commonwealth unity with deep dedication and constant commitment.

As we gather here in Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee Year, I invite you to acknowledge and applaud the exemplary and outstanding service that she has given to the Commonwealth of Nations and to all its peoples.

The Commonwealth's relevance generally

I return now to the matter of the Commonwealth's relevance generally.

No organization can best serve the people it represents in the modern world unless it reforms itself to cope with new global challenges.

The Commonwealth is now 63 years old and requires urgent reform.

In 2009, Commonwealth Heads established an Eminent Persons Group of 10 persons chaired by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdullah Badawi, with the specific mandate "to undertake an examination of options for reform".

I was a member of the Group and its Rapporteur.

The Group's Report, *A Commonwealth of the People: Time for Urgent Reform*, was faithful to its mandate to examine the options for Commonwealth reform.

What emerged was a comprehensive body of proposals for enabling the Commonwealth to live up to its potential: from change in the area of honouring its own declared values to structural reform of the Secretariat.

Secretary-General, Kamalesh Sharma submitted it directly to Heads of Government at their meeting in Perth, Australia last October where it dominated the Conference's discussion.

Summing-up the results of the Australia Heads of Government meeting in relation to the Report and recommendations of the EPG, Amitav Banerji, the Heads of the Political Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat said the following:

The Report of the EPG, with its 106 wide-ranging recommendations, was the centrepiece of CHOGM. Of these, nearly 40 recommendations were accepted in Perth, while 12 others were deemed acceptable in principle, subject to their financial implications. Forty-three others were remitted to Foreign Ministers for further consideration and advice to Heads before the end of 2012. If two-thirds or more of the EPG's recommendations are eventually accepted, the Group's painstaking work over five meetings, and involving wide public consultation, could certainly not be said to have gone in vain.

If governments indeed accept two-thirds of the EPG's recommendations, the principal beneficiaries will be the Commonwealth Institutions and the 32 small states of the Commonwealth.

The recommendations of greatest and pressing importance to them include:

- Reform of the Commonwealth institutions;
- Critical development issues such as the overwhelming debt of small states and how to deal with it;
- Reform of the criteria of the international financial institutions for "graduating" middle income developing countries from concessionary financing;
- The threats of Climate Change to the existence of small island states; and

- The creation of strategic partnerships to make the Commonwealth effective in delivering benefits to its people.

Taking the Report forward: Making the Commonwealth work

A Task Force of Ministers has now been established, and, in the coming months, work will be done on 52 of the EPG's recommendations for urgent reform.

It is in the interest of every small state in the Commonwealth to follow the work of the Task Force fully and carefully, pressing for the adoption and implementation of the recommendations.

None of them would harm small states, each of them would enhance the prospects for small countries.

We should be mindful that should the Commonwealth wither, it is small states in particular that will be the main losers.

They would forfeit the only multinational organisation in which they have a voice equal to larger and more influential countries, and which champions their causes.

We should recall that 70% of the financing of the Commonwealth Secretariat and its work comes from only three countries – Britain, Canada and Australia.

Therefore, it is in the interest of small states to encourage the Commonwealth to adopt a vision of world affairs and a work programme that engages the widest cross-section of its leaders, and that includes, along with development imperatives, acting against violations of human rights, democracy and the rule of law wherever it occurs.

A Commonwealth People's Charter

One of the EPG recommendations that Commonwealth leaders immediately accepted at the meeting in Australia is that the Commonwealth should have a *Charter*.

As we saw it, there would have been no added value to the Commonwealth if Heads of Government had signed yet another piece of paper in the name of the Commonwealth people about which the people were not consulted and about which the people knew nothing.

We recommended a process of discussing the proposed *Charter* among the civil society organisations and in parliament, schools, universities, and in town hall meetings in each Commonwealth country.

In our view such public consultation would 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 – something that has not happened with any previous declaration.

The British, Australian and Canadian governments deserve the congratulations of Commonwealth citizens everywhere for already launching the process of public consultation in their countries.

In the Caribbean, no Commonwealth member-state has yet done so.

We must urge that they do so soon.

Caribbean people, too, have a vested interest in the content and character of the *Charter*.

The Commonwealth's role for small states

I turn now to the Commonwealth's role and relevance for small states.

Of the Commonwealth's 54-member states, 32 are small states defined largely as states with populations of a million and half people or less.

These small states are located in the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, Africa and the South China Sea.

From the inception of small states' membership in the association, the Commonwealth has shown consistent leadership in articulating to the world the challenges they confronted.

For instance, Caribbean countries have used the Commonwealth to good effect to sensitize countries outside of their region to threats to their territory.

Belize and Guyana, which endure territorial claims from Guatemala and Venezuela respectively, have utilised Commonwealth meetings at all levels to win public declarations of support for their territorial integrity, and to promote peaceful settlements of these issues.

In the case of Belize, every Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting since 1975 – six years before Belize's independence – has declared its unwavering support for its territorial integrity.

Guyana has had similar declarations since 1979.

Undoubtedly, the governments of Guatemala and Venezuela have been cognizant of the position of Commonwealth countries and this may have influenced the restraint that they have so far exercised in not using their superior military capacity to further their territorial ambitions.

The Commonwealth as Champion of small states

The Commonwealth connection has been – and remains - an irreplaceable asset for small states in many practical ways.

The Commonwealth Secretariat operates programmes with particular small states components running through the full gamut of its activities including education, climate change, trade facilitation, and human development.

And, while the Commonwealth is not an aid agency, since 1971 it has operated a modest technical assistance Fund - the Commonwealth Fund

for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) - providing technical expertise to small states.

Over the last decade, 60 per cent of its resources has been devoted to small states.

Commonwealth Support for St Vincent and the Grenadines

In the particular case of St Vincent and the Grenadines, in the 10 year period up to 2010, the CFTC provided direct assistance valued at approximately £730,000.

During that period, St Vincent contributed £214,020 to the CFTC.

So that for every £1 that St Vincent contributed to the CFTC, it got back over £3.40 worth of direct assistance.

Among the projects to which CFTC has provided direct assistance to St Vincent are the following:

- Maritime boundaries negotiation
- Improving sustainable debt management
- IT system development for airport management
- Development of a tourism investment plan
- Strengthening customs administration and management to improve efficiency and increase customs revenue.
- Development of credit facilities for micro and small businesses
- Advisory support on International Law Treaties and Conventions
- Capacity building for public sector development.

In the 10 year period ending 2010, over 190 nationals of St Vincent and the Grenadines have been trained in priority areas of need for public sector development.

Beyond relevant and appropriate technical assistance, perhaps the greatest importance of the Commonwealth to small states is that it provides leaders of these states with direct access to Heads of Government and Ministers of large countries that would otherwise be impossible.

For example, at Heads of Government meetings, leaders of small states have direct access, as equals, to the leaders of Britain, Canada, Australia, India and South Africa – all important members of the G20.

Small states leaders can advance their own causes and interests and try to engage leaders of influential Commonwealth countries to progress them in the international community.

Despite this focus by the Commonwealth on small states, their condition remains difficult.

But their situation would be unimaginably worse without the championship of the Commonwealth.

Small States: A continuing role for the Commonwealth

As we look to the future, with 32 of its 54 members being small states, the Commonwealth must continue to champion their concerns.

Small states are usually the hardest hit by both economic and financial crises, and natural disasters.

For instance, even though they played no part in creating the global financial crisis that began in late 2008, the growth rate of the majority of small states in 2009, 2010 and 2011, following the effects of the crisis, were below the average for the world and below that for developing countries as a whole.

In 1985, it was the Commonwealth's work on the particular vulnerabilities of small states that led to the World Bank's decision to make special provision for small island states within its concessional lending.

Since then the Bank has "graduated" many small states from concessional financing on the single criterion of per capita income.

But, although "graduated", the majority of these countries continue to be afflicted by many of the challenges facing other developing countries.

Therefore, it is critical that the criteria used to determine their economic well-being be reviewed.

Tonight, I call on the leadership of small states to urge the Commonwealth collective to mandate the Secretary-General to again appoint an expert group to establish the case for concessional financing for small states, and, on the basis of such work, to renew high-level advocacy on their behalf.

As the world has moved increasingly to globalisation and trade liberalisation, the majority of small states, which were from the very outset only marginally capable of economic survival on their own, have found themselves overwhelmed by new challenges such as sea-level rise, drug trafficking and attendant high rates of crime, and a lack of capacity for negotiating the integration of their societies into larger trading blocs and the new global trading system.

More recently unsustainable high levels of debt have been added to this litany of woes of some small states.

Further exacerbating the difficulties faced by small states, World Bank research shows that the highest per capita rates of 'brain drain' are not from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia or Latin America, but from small states.

The World Health Organization has confirmed that among the ten countries with the highest expatriation rates of doctors to industrialized countries such as the US, Britain and Canada, are six Commonwealth small states: Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, Guyana, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago and St Vincent and the Grenadines – all from the Caribbean.

The Global crisis produced the G20 to replace the G7 which had controlled the world economy over the last sixty years.

The G20, it was said, would stimulate global demand and supply, but there have been no accompanying measures for the smallest, most vulnerable countries for debt relief, new aid, and sustainable capital flows.

While Commonwealth countries such as India and South Africa have been included in the G20 along with Britain, Canada and Australia, small states have been left out in the cold.

Small states would be right in looking to the Commonwealth to help secure for them a collective voice – even if occasionally – in the councils of the G20.

In doing so, they would find ready support from the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Kamallesh Sharma, who has already made contributions of a Commonwealth perspective to relevant G20 meetings.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, although we have traversed tonight a wide Commonwealth field, we have done so to set the central question in context.

That central question is the relevance of the modern Commonwealth to St Vincent and the Grenadines – a small Island developing state.

The Commonwealth is a network of networks.

Its members constitute more than 25 per cent of the membership of the United Nations, nearly 40 per cent of the World Trade Organisation, just under 40 per cent of the African Union, 90 percent of the Pacific Islands Forum, and 20 per cent of the Organisation of Islamic countries.

In addition five Commonwealth states are members of the G20, and Commonwealth countries are influential members of the European Union and the North American Free Trade Association.

Properly utilised, the Commonwealth should be an important tool in the advancement of the development objectives of St Vincent and the Grenadines.

There can be no doubt of the Commonwealth's relevance to the government and people of this growing and vibrant nation.

Thank you very much.