



'organisation in danger': Sir Ronald Sanders

'Reform must be priority for Commonwealth'

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THE 54-member Commonwealth is facing the choice of either investing necessary reform or facing condemnation of "irrelevance", according to an assessment of the latest meeting of a ten-member Eminent Persons Group (EMG).

The choice is expected to be a major agenda issue for the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, scheduled for October in Australia.

At a media briefing this past weekend in London following a two-day meeting of the EMG at the Commonwealth Secretariat, Sir Ronald Sanders, who has been dealing with public communication for the Group, said significant recommendations have been advanced for required reform that could help transform the 54-member association as being quite fit for a world that is changing rapidly.

A dozen countries of the Caribbean Community are among the member states of the Commonwealth which held its last summit in November 2009 in Port of Spain, hosted by then Prime Minister Patrick Manning and current chairman Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar is scheduled to pass the baton of chairmanship to Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard in October.

In reporting on the outcome of the EMG's fourth meeting, Sir Ronald of Guyana—one of two Caribbean nationals on the Group (the other is Jamaica's Patricia Francis)—said a package of specific recommendations for reform had emerged, consistent with the mandate arising from the

2009 Commonwealth Summit in Port of Spain.

It is envisaged the proposed reforms will "sharpen the impact, strengthen the established networks and, generally, raise the profile of the Commonwealth".

"For sometime now," he added, "the influence of the Commonwealth—once considerable on matters such as institutionalised racism in Southern Africa, the importance of establishing a new economic world order and standing-up for fundamental rights and principles—has been waning.

"The organisation is in danger of becoming irrelevant. That is why it must now embrace reform," he emphasised.

Recommendations made at the just concluded EPG meeting include developing a Charter of the Commonwealth, creating a Commonwealth Commissioner on Democracy and the Rule of Law, and utilising the association's strength as a network of networks to promote development.

Commonwealth leaders were now being urged that the proposed Commonwealth Charter should be subject to consultation with Commonwealth organisations and, through them, Commonwealth people, so they have strong input into its creation.

The role of the proposed Commonwealth Commissioner on Democracy and the Rule of Law will be to advise the Commonwealth Secretary General and the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) on any violations of the association's core values within member states and to suggest actions that should be taken.

He said the Commissioner "will also assess the suitability of countries which apply for membership".

In his statement, Sir Ronald said the EPG members feel the Commonwealth "must stick to its core values, such as development, democracy, rule of law and human rights. These must be set the forefront of the Commonwealth's focus that must now extend to critical issues of climate change and HIV/AIDS..."