"The Commonwealth of Nations: Its role for Global Good"
A presentation by Sir Ronald Sanders
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I am greatly honoured to be part of this very distinguished and accomplished group of persons.

I feel a deep sense of privilege to speak with you this morning, and to do so in Nassau where I have many good friends with whom I have laboured in the vineyard of human development and economic progress.

Among these distinguished Bahamians is your Chairman, Richard Demeritte, with whom I worked closely in London when we were High Commissioners for our respective countries.

We worked together in common cause for the upliftment of the peoples of the developing world.

Subsequently, two other distinguished Bahamians and I worked in that struggle as High Commissioners – Sir Arthur Foulkes, more recently Governor-General of this great nation, and Basil O'Brien.

With all three of these notable Bahamian public servants I shared a deep commitment to the very values and principles to which your Association subscribes.

We were committed to the highest standards of excellence and leadership in achieving the best we could for our individual nations, for the countries of the Caribbean collectively, and for the people of developing states more generally.

In that vineyard in which we laboured, there were many thorns.

Reaping the fruits of our efforts did not come without pain and without disappointment.

We encountered obstacles every day.

But we learned to take them in our stride; to remain focused; and to maintain our resolve to stick to objectives in which we firmly believed and which were in the interest of our peoples.

We fought those battles in the context of the Commonwealth of Nations, and that is why I have chosen to talk with you about the Commonwealth and its role for global good.

I will come to that subject in full.

But first, I offer some reflections on lessons that we learn in life.

When Richard Demeritte and I worked together, the issue of great moment in global affairs was the battle to end Apartheid in South Africa and to free Nelson Mandela.

We were, of course, supporting actors to a cast of stars of the Commonwealth scene – Julius Nyrere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Brian Mulroney of Canada, Bob Hawke of Australia and Shridath 'Sonny' Ramphal, the Commonwealth Secretary-General.

When Richard and I left London as High Commissioners, we had contributed to winning battles in that long and bitter war, but the final victory had eluded us.

Nonetheless, we had helped to strike some deep and telling blows.

One such blow was delivered right here in Nassau in 1985 at a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting under the chairmanship of the late Sir Lynden Pindling, then Prime Minister of the Bahamas.

It was "The Nassau Accord" of Commonwealth Heads of Government at which it was agreed to call on the white government of South Africa to dismantle its apartheid policy and to enter negotiations with the country's black majority.

That Meeting – thirty years ago last month - and the Nassau Accord were significant because, apart from the Margaret Thatcher government in Britain, all other Commonwealth countries – black and white, developed and developing, big and small - decided to isolate the racist regime in South Africa and to end the scourge of brutality that strangled and suffocated the people of that wretched country.

It would take another 5 years for Nelson Mandela to be freed from 27 years of imprisonment that had deprived him of the best years of his mature life.

Another 4 years would pass until a new Constitution would be promulgated and black people would be allowed to vote in their own county to elect a government with Mandela as President.

But, the decisive blow that led to Mandela's freedom and the end of the vile system of apartheid was struck by Commonwealth Heads of Government right here in Nassau.

In October 1985, Nassau stood out as a beacon of light for the liberation of oppressed and suffering people.

It is an occasion for special pride by the people of the Bahamas, and one that should be long remembered.

I was fortunate that, after leaving diplomatic service in London in 1987, two years after that determining moment in Nassau, I was to return as High Commissioner in London in 1996 when Nelson Mandela came to Britain on a State visit as President of South Africa.

I had the honour to greet him in the company of Sir Arthur Foulkes, then Bahamas High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

So with my two Bahamian colleagues, I had shared in the struggle against racism in Southern Africa and the fight to free the people of South Africa – black and white – from a system that had mangled their lives with its inequities and injustices.

Those were special moments, and you would understand why they bond together, in a lasting way, those of us who shared them.

We were brothers in a defining moment in human history that said we, the children of slavery and indentured labour – the children of man's inhumanity to man, were determined that such inhumanity would not stand; and in our small way, we would use the offices we were fortunate to hold to end them.

And, if I may, I want to share a personal anecdote about the anti-apartheid struggle that had its beginning in 1987, and which had for me a touching ending just two months ago in New York.

In the height of apartheid in South Africa, while Nelson Mandela was physically locked up in prison, his brothers and sisters in the African National Congress were either outlawed in South Africa or exiled in other lands.

Neither outlaw nor exile could travel.

The South African apartheid regime refused to give them travel documents.

My government in Antigua and Barbuda made the decision to facilitate their travel and I was mandated to provide as many as I could with Antigua and Barbuda passports on which they could travel.

In 1987, I gave Antigua and Barbuda passports to 31 exiles.

I had no idea who they were except that they were brutalised human beings, struggling for basic human, civil and political rights in their own land.

That was sufficient.

Last September in New York, I took the original passport forms and photographs to the United Nations General Assembly.

I showed the forms and the original photographs to South Africa's President Jacob Zuma.

Tears came to his eyes.

And he held on one particular form and original photograph.

"I must have these", he said. "I must have these".

Why?

Because it was an original photograph of himself.

In 1987, I gave a passport to freedom to a person described as "Teacher" who was fighting for the liberation of his people.

I had no idea then that, one day, Jacob Zuma, an exile on the run for his life, would be President of a free South Africa where apartheid and all its horrors would be at an end.

Needless to say I gave him the passport and the photograph.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I applaud each of you and your Association.

For you are committed to those ideals, values and principles that, properly and fully implemented, make a difference to the quality of human life

The values of fraternal support, empowerment of others, the progressive well-being of people and the betterment of their nations are powerful tools in the upliftment of all mankind.

If each of you remains steadfast in your beliefs, you too will extend a hand to an exile who one day can return to his homeland; you too will give a freedom pass to a teacher who can one day be a President.

All of what I have said to you took place in the context of the Commonwealth of 52 nations.

It is to its role as an instrument for global good that I now turn.

But, before I do so, I make it clear that I am a candidate for election to the post of Commonwealth Secretary-General, at elections in a few days' time – on November 27th – at a meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government.

Let us not doubt for a moment that the world is teetering on a dangerous precipice.

Nor should we linger in the false notion that small countries, such as the Bahamas, are immune from the theatres of conflict that engulf larger and more powerful states.

My worst nightmare for our idyllic islands of the Caribbean is that the tactics of terror so casually utilized by extreme groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS) will be deployed within them.

If it turns out that, despite its greater experience of terrorism, Egyptian airport security could not stop a bomb being placed on the Russian Civilian plane whose explosion killed hundreds of tourists, how more vulnerable are Caribbean airports and seaports?

And the answer to this growing problem cannot be simply to bolster security.

That is only part of the answer and a very expensive one for small countries with limited resources.

In any event, it would tackle only the possible effect and not the actual cause.

The real cause lies in the radicalization of peoples in many parts of the world based on grievances, both perceived and real, that find expression in brutal violence and terror and sometimes hides behind a thin veil of religion.

This problem cannot be bombed out of existence, nor can all its perpetrators and followers be imprisoned.

What is required are initiatives at a global level to promote mutual understanding and respect among all faith and communities; and an inquiry into the causes of radicalization with recommendations and financial resources to address it.

Made up of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews and Hindus, the Commonwealth of Nations – which already has the machinery for dialogue in place at the levels of government and civil society – is well placed to begin such initiatives and to conduct such an inquiry.

Incidentally, some of this work has already been done in the Commonwealth.

Ten years ago in 2005, the Commonwealth established a Commission on Respect and Understanding.

It studied the issue for almost two years and produced a report in 2007 entitled, "Civil Paths to Peace".

One of passages in the report has the following compelling argument:

"Acts of terrorism and homicide are, of course, criminal activities calling for effective security measures and no serious analysis of group violence can fail to begin with that basic understanding.

But the analysis cannot end there, since many social, economic and political initiatives can be undertaken to confront and defeat the appeal on which the fomenters of violence and terrorism draw to get active foot soldiers and passive sympathizers.

The process of recruitment is a battle for people's minds, making crucial use of turbid sentiments and crude reasoning.

Cultivated disrespect of target groups as well as engineered misunderstandings of the ways of the world are integral parts of the process of instigating and sustaining violence.

This is why the battle against terrorism and group violence have to go much beyond policing criminal activities and confronting military challenges important though they are".

The Commonwealth will never be a powerful organization and should not aim to be - it is not a military or economic grouping.

But it can be an association of considerable influence for good in its countries individually and collectively as well as for the international community, if its members accentuated the matters on which they find common ground on issues such as:

fair and just trade; addressing terrorism; reform of the international financial system to boost economic development; promoting understanding and tolerance of the rights of minority communities, including homosexuals and lesbians; tackling climate change and global warming; looking to the needs of small and vulnerable states; strengthening democratic institutions for economic and social development as much as for political stability.

This is not utopian; the Commonwealth was once such a player. It can be again.

A former German President, Richard Von Weizsäcker, who was a great admirer of the Commonwealth said of the organization that "while it cannot negotiate for the world, it can help the world to negotiate".

I remain convinced that he was – and is – right.

In the present dispensation of international politics and military and economic alliances, it would be impossible to form the Commonwealth.

That it already exists as a forum for international dialogue and debate in an atmosphere of intimacy is a gift to its member states and the potential they have together for promoting peace and development globally.

I hope that, from what I have said here, you the members and participants of the International Third World Leaders Association recognise an organisation with which you can identify.

Your theme for this Forum is: “Freedom, Responsibility, Transition, Succession – 21st Century Leadership Challenges”.

It could just as well be the theme for the Commonwealth as a whole as it now stands at a crossroad.

Questioning the relevance and value of the Commonwealth is nothing new – such questioning has occurred ever since the modern Commonwealth was created in 1949.

However, doubts have intensified in recent time about the voluntary association of now 53 countries.

Claims are repeatedly made that the organisation is no longer relevant or useful.

Its persistent portrayal is that of a relic of Britain’s colonial past or a hypocritical grouping which declares commitments to shared values but fails to uphold them.

The Commonwealth member states can allow it to continue a slow march to oblivion, or they can rejuvenate and re-energise it to make it work in their mutual interest and for the benefit of the global community.

While the Heads of Commonwealth governments are at the centre of these options, the organisation’s Secretary-General and the Secretariat have very special roles.

Heads of Government are busy managing the affairs of their own countries, and responding to pressing challenges within their regions and internationally.

Therefore, the task of creating a vision and purposes for the Commonwealth that would appeal to leaders of the Commonwealth and invoke their support falls substantially on the Secretary-General.

If the Secretary-General does not proffer a vision of the Commonwealth that is politically appealing to, and motivational for, Heads of Government, and if the Secretariat does not deliver work that excites the imagination of governments,

non-governmental organisations, the media, academia and the people of Commonwealth countries, the association could wither and die.

That is why I have allowed my name to be put forward by my government for election to the post of Commonwealth Secretary-General.

I am a passionate believer in the Commonwealth.

Between 2010 and 2011, I served as a member and rapporteur of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group who were commissioned by Heads of Government to make recommendations for rejuvenation the organisation and making it relevant to the needs of its peoples at this time.

Before that I had served in many capacities in the cause of the Commonwealth's advancement.

I believe that, by its very nature, the Commonwealth has the capacity to deliver good for its member states individually and collectively.

The Commonwealth's most powerful asset is that its 52 member states come from every continent of the world; its peoples represent every religion and ethnic group; its members are developed nations and developing nations; big countries and small islands.

It is, essentially, a microcosm of the world.

Its greatest strength is that it has strived to find solutions to the world's problems, not to exacerbate them.

It has done so on political issues, none more celebrated than fighting racism in Southern Africa.

It has also done so on many economic issues through the work of groups of experts from Commonwealth countries who labored together to create blueprints that were advanced into the international community and encouraged necessary change.

Great leaders from every continent of the world – Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas and the world's oceans like the Pacific - have played notable roles in modernizing the Commonwealth and sustaining it; in its early years and beyond.

It is from those moorings that the Commonwealth ship has come unloose and to them that it needs to re-fasten in the interest of the organization, its members and the global community.

If its leaders can once again tackle the issues of moment in a dialogue restricted to themselves, I have no doubt that they have the capacity either to find solutions or to begin the process of doing so.

Leaders do not have to agree on everything to move forward.

The matters on which they agree, even if partially, would be sufficient to create a common agenda by which Commonwealth countries can advance their own interests and contribute to international well-being.

One such pressing issue is Climate Change with its attendant global warming.

Climate Change is the greatest threat that now confronts all mankind.

It knows no borders and it respects neither size nor economic and military power; it cannot be turned back by immigration controls; it cannot be bombed into oblivion.

All of our countries are its potential victims even where its existence and danger continue to be denied.

But it poses the greatest threat to the smallest on our shared planet, particularly the island states in the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

These islands of the Bahamas know well the destruction that Climate Change has heralded with more frequent and intense hurricanes.

The sadness is that these disasters are not occurring in these islands through their own fault.

They are happening because of the excesses of larger and more powerful countries which will not bend from their abuse of the world's atmosphere even at the risk of eliminating other societies, some older than their own.

Increasingly, several of these islands are drowning, and their age-old civilizations are facing extinction.

I think particularly of the people of the Marshall Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu in the Pacific; of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean; and the Caribbean islands in The Bahamas chain and Barbuda where the prospect of disappearance looms large from sea-level rise.

I recall the words of Pope Francis who said, particularly to the rich countries of the world that:

"Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters point to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all society is founded."

It is little known that the international alarm about Climate Change was first sounded in the Commonwealth, and the early efforts to study it and to recommend action to curb it began in the Commonwealth.

Nations will gather in December in Paris in the UN Committee of the Parties to once again try to reach agreement on the levels of carbon emission and to set limits to global warming.

Small states, such as the Bahamas, have argued that any limit over 1.5°C would threaten their survival.

The St Lucian Poet and Nobel Laureate, Derek Walcott put it succinctly when he warned in his Nobel lecture that:

> *"… a morning could come in which governments might ask what happened not merely to the forests and the bays, but to a whole people*".

Then, there is the cost of mitigation and adaptation measures that have to be put in place by island communities in the Caribbean and Pacific.

These costs are horrendous, and no small state will be able to implement them unless there is considerable financial assistance from the global community.

And, there is every justification for small island states to make such a demand.

For while they are the greatest victims of climate change, they contribute less than 0.01% of the harmful carbon emissions in the world.

If this is not done, the present inequities between and within nations will increase with serious implications for economic decline, political instability and conflict.

Refugees from climate change could become as much a problem for rich countries in the future as are the refugees of war in the present.

But, of course, the physical dislocation and the resultant unemployment and poverty would be felt most acutely in the island-nations themselves.

Decades of development and progress could be retarded.

That is why the Commonwealth would be wise to encourage a frank and meaningful discussion between its large and small nations on the link between the environment and poverty.

That is one of the discussions that should be on the table of Heads of Government, not in a confrontational manner, but in a way that would cause the leaders of developed and developing nations to actually seek common solutions, however limited they might be.

I suspect that even after the curtain has been drawn on the Climate Change drama in Paris, and the various actors have left the empty stage, the effects will continue to be felt in developing countries, particularly small states that lack the financial resources to protect themselves.

That is a cudgel that should be taken up by the Commonwealth, for 31 of its 52 members are small states.

Small states have a moral and democratic right to expect the Commonwealth to continue to champion their cause and stand-up for their interests.

That is another reason that I have allowed my name to be put forward for doing the job of Secretary-General.

I turn now to another crucial issue that confronts the world community and is especially relevant in the Commonwealth and in the Caribbean.

It is the issue of Youth.

The global population under the age of 30 now numbers more than half.

Three in every five Commonwealth persons are under the age of 30.

That is a large body of young, energetic people.

If investment is made in them, they can be positive contributors to economic and social development; if they are neglected alienation can turn their youth and vibrancy to destructive purposes.

I suspect that the scale and nature of the youth issue differs from country to country.

What is certain is that for small countries, the overwhelming challenge is to deliver employment.

Every year, hundreds of young people come on to the job market to compete for a limited number of opportunities.

Governments struggle to find ways in small countries with limited resources to create new jobs.

It is heartrending and frustrating that when countries create new businesses that can produce revenues and employment, they are blocked by strictures and rules that treat them as equal to larger and richer states.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the World Trade Organization where a small country, like the Bahamas, is treated as the economic and financial equal of the United States or Japan.

It is evident too in the rules of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that punish small countries by excluding them from concessionary financing on the basis of one criterion – and that is that they have a high per capita income.

The International Financial Institutions appear oblivious to the fact that, in all the small Caribbean states, where there may be high income per head of population, that figure is skewered because a small number earn a disproportionately higher sum than the majority of the population.

They also seem unwilling to take account of the fact that island communities have high transactional costs because they are forced to import much of what they consume or use.

Yet, unless the international community does sit up and take notice of the real consequences of smallness and the vulnerabilities of these countries to external

events not of their own creation, they will be condemned to economic marginalization.

In turn, youth employment and youth opportunities will be constrained.

And the point should be made that small countries are not seeking a hand-out; they want a hand-up.

They do not want a bowl with which to beg; they want a ladder on which to climb.

Since 1987, the Commonwealth has produced two compelling reports on the Vulnerability of Small States and how to overcome them.

Those reports contain valuable blueprints for international cooperation in addressing the challenges of small countries.

With 31 of the 52 member of the Commonwealth being small, they have a right to expect their priorities to be addressed, not only in their own interest but in the interest of global stability.

I firmly believe that the cause of small states must receive vigorous and meaningful attention by the Commonwealth.

At a wider level and moving beyond small states, Commonwealth leaders could advance the international trade agenda effectively if together they examine the inherent constraints in the present system, including the contradiction between free trade as a magic instrument for economic growth and the importance of developing countries having space to protect their own small and medium sized companies from destruction.

The countries of the North should recall that their industrialization was not built on free trade or on reciprocal and equal relations with countries richer and economically stronger than themselves.

In this connection, there should also be at the Commonwealth level a discussion of the democratisation the UN Security Council, to include countries such as India, and to broaden representation on the decision-making bodies of the IMF and the World Bank.

Again, these discussion should be conducted in a genuine atmosphere of collegiality in which solutions are aired to thorny problems.

A North-South discussion is not taking place anywhere.

The countries of the North are talking in their own councils.

The countries of the South are talking in their own councils.

Each of these separate discussions re-inforce entrenched positions that erode confidence in international cooperation and hold back global progress.

The Commonwealth could break the mould by starting a meaningful dialogue on how the rules of the international system can give a voice to Africa, Asia and to small countries in the Pacific and the Caribbean.

Distinguished participants of this illustrious group of International Third World Leaders, I thank you again for the privilege of addressing your conference.

I know that you agree with my view that we are all one human family, sharing a common planet and that we must strive to make it a place free of conflict and safe for all to thrive.

I applaud your efforts and urge you to continue the good that you have been doing for the last 30 years.

The world needs more people like you.

I leave you with the words of Maya Angelou which inspire and motivate me, without fail, every time I read them.

I hope they move you too.

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world

That is when, and only when
We come to it.

Let us come to it, and soon.

Thank you.