

Remarks at an Informal Consultation on Reinvigorating the
Commonwealth at Wilton Park on Wednesday, 1st September 2010

By Sir Ronald Sanders
Member of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group¹

I am delighted at the opportunity to talk with so distinguished and important a group of foreign policy experts from around the Commonwealth about the Eminent Persons Group (EPG).

I thank Wilton Park for this opportunity to share with you a flavour of the work upon which the Group has embarked, but, more importantly, to learn from you during the course of this evening your own views of how the mandate we have been given by Heads of Government might best be pursued.

Over the years of the Commonwealth's existence, much has been written about how it is perceived, how it can better communicate and project itself, how it can strengthen its institutions, and how it can remain relevant in a changed and changing world.

The essential difference between what has been written so far by academics, think-tanks, parliamentarians and others, and the work of the EPG is that the latter has been specifically mandated by Heads of Government.

They have asked the Group for a report that, in the words of the *Affirmation* they issued at their meeting last November in Port-of-Spain, will ensure that “the Commonwealth will remain relevant to its times and people in future” and will help to build “a stronger and more resilient and progressive family of nations founded on enduring values and principles”.

¹ Sir Ronald Sanders was appointed as a member of the Eminent Persons Group in July 2010 to report to Commonwealth Heads of Government on ways to make the Commonwealth stronger and more relevant. This speech was delivered at an Informal Consultation on the Commonwealth at Wilton Park on which he shared a platform with Lord Howell, Minister in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Participants included Heads of Commonwealth Organisations and Commonwealth High Commissioners in London.

There is now a real chance to get Heads of Government to address the issues in the inter-governmental Commonwealth that have endangered its attractiveness - if not its relevance - to people within the Commonwealth and in the global community.

This is a rare and crucial opportunity.

For, regardless of the energy, diligence and commitment invested in the web of Commonwealth organisations - including the Commonwealth Secretariat - the role of the Commonwealth and the regard in which it is held, depends on the willingness of its governments to give it a special brand, a special meaning, and a special difference in the international community.

Our group must present ideas that Heads of Government can collectively endorse and implement.

They must be ideas that are visionary as well as practical; ambitious as well as achievable; standard-setting as well as opportunity creating.

In all this, we have to be mindful that the Commonwealth is not an Organisation tied by Treaty whose rules are binding on member states. It is a voluntary association of sovereign states which have decided that because they share certain traditions, there is benefit in working together.

But, we must be heedful too that, in their association, Commonwealth governments, on behalf of their peoples, have made commitments to democracy, human rights, human dignity and freedom, and that fulfilment of these commitments lie at the heart of the Commonwealth's future credibility and its relevance.

The Group intends to take account of as much of the thinking that has already occurred and we have invited specific persons and the general public to give us the benefit of their experience and knowledge.

Additionally, through informal meetings, such as this one, each of us will undoubtedly profit from discussions with people like you who are engaged on a day to day basis in the Commonwealth's business.

Early last month, another member of the Group, Senator Hugh Segal of Canada, and I had an informal session with present and past members of the Canadian foreign policy establishment who were concerned with Commonwealth matters.

I am pleased to say that the “light in the Commonwealth window”, which Canada’s Prime Minister John Diefenbaker set alight in March 1961 for the people of South Africa even as the Apartheid regime withdrew from the Commonwealth, still burns brightly in the Canadian window in relation to its commitment to the Commonwealth.

And, here in Britain, if there were any doubt about the British government’s attitude to the Commonwealth, those doubts have been dispelled by the passionate support of the Commonwealth by Lord Howell, the Minister responsible for Commonwealth Affairs, and the statements made in opposition and government by Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary William Hague particularly his assertion that:

“We will adopt a more assertive energetic and enthusiastic attitude towards the Commonwealth since there is vast potential to be unlocked and Britain must, along with our friends and allies, be at the forefront of these efforts”.

And, notwithstanding the concerns expressed in the findings of the “Commonwealth Conversation” by the Royal Commonwealth Society in London, it is instructive that so many people were keen to participate in the project and to continue to believe that the Commonwealth has a potential to fulfil.

The EPG, as you know, has had one meeting so far - in London in July.

In our first meeting, we recognised that the Commonwealth should not and cannot attempt to tackle every issue that confronts mankind. We agreed to focus on the Commonwealth’s strengths and work to make them more effective.

We recognised the important inter-linkages between democracy/governance/human rights/rule of law on one hand and poverty alleviation/sustainable development/economic empowerment on the other.

Importantly, we acknowledged that just as democracy will not be upheld without development, development will not be sustained without democracy.

We have begun to explore a number of ideas such as a Commonwealth Charter that expresses an ethos of Commonwealth Community reflecting civil and political norms, and commits member countries to fundamental rights and freedoms, values and principles as contained in

the *Port-of Spain Affirmation* and in previous declarations of Heads of Government including *Singapore Principles*, *Harare Declaration*, *Millbrook Action Programme* and *Kampala Declaration on Transforming Societies*.

Discussion focussed too on the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) established, as you will recall, to protect Commonwealth values and principles and to take action against member states that indulged in serious or persistent violations of them.

The Group regards CMAG as a bright jewel in the Commonwealth Crown; one that should not be allowed to tarnish, but should continue to sparkle as a manifestation of Commonwealth commitment to its values.

In this regard, the Group would like to see further empowerment of CMAG to take up the full gamut of its remit to deal with “serious or persistent” violations beyond unconstitutional overthrow of an elected government.

We are aware that CMAG is reviewing its own work and will probably have a position by September of this year, one month before the EPG is due to meet again. In considering our own view of CMAG, the Group will take CMAG’s review into account.

We regard the Secretary-General’s “good offices” role as equally important in relation to violations of Commonwealth declared principles. Prevention is better than cure. But, we recognise that this role is under resourced and requires not only wider machinery to alert the Secretary-General to potential problems, but also a mechanism that goes beyond government permission, to set the machinery in motion.

These are very early days in the development of our ideas on this matter but we are convinced that problems of poverty, inadequate health and sanitation, education and infrastructural development are most effectively and sustainably addressed within a framework of democracy and good governance.

And, we are not neglectful of the need to promote social and economic development or of the global challenges of the moment that have a great impact upon many Commonwealth countries. These include climate change which threatens the very existence of some countries; and the need for special and differential treatment for small states by the international financial institutions and the World Trade Organisation.

We know that to remain relevant, the Commonwealth's work has to be impactful; it has to mean a lot to a lot of people.

We also recognise that while the Commonwealth organizations know where the problems are and can assemble the teams to deal with them, they lack the resources to do so.

Those resources cannot come from governments alone.

But, governments have to acknowledge that they cannot be mean with the Commonwealth if they want the Commonwealth to mean something.

Since the 1990s, the budget of the Secretariat has been consistently reduced. The size of the Secretariat staff is now smaller than that of the Secretariat of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). The former serves 54 nations, and the latter 15 countries – many of which are micro states. Governments will have to invest in the Commonwealth Secretariat's work, if they expect it to deliver high quality goods.

Strategic partnerships with private sector groups and foundations, even outside the Commonwealth, are also a font for resources. We will encourage the creation of such strategic partnerships not only from within the Commonwealth, but outside it as well.

We believe that through these partnerships, the Commonwealth could make a big difference to inoculations against disease, improving infant mortality, and improving educational facilities.

The EPG is also very aware that knowledge of the Commonwealth is poor. While that may be forgivable in the wider international community, it is a travesty within the Commonwealth itself. There is much to be done about how best to communicate with media and greater thought has to be applied to this area.

However, a greater outreach process may be possible using existing Commonwealth organisations and building upon them. In this connection, we have begun tentative discussions about the possible development of a youth programme aimed at promoting exchanges by young people between Commonwealth countries in which transfer of knowledge and volunteering would be underlying considerations (such as a 'Commonwealth Development Corps').

We would encourage members of the Association of Commonwealth Universities to be partners in this alongside the Commonwealth Foundation and the business community.

We see it as a movement of young people across Commonwealth countries to live, study and commune in each other's countries in a structured and organised programme that would leave each of them with a better knowledge and appreciation of each other's culture and circumstances.

We are also considering the expansion of the four regional Commonwealth Youth Centres into larger Commonwealth regional offices for a wider range of activities.

The question has often been posed: if the Commonwealth did not exist, would we invent it? The answer is: we are lucky. We don't have to invent it. It exists! It is a magnificent gift in a troubled world – an association of 54 countries, large and small, from all the continents of the world representing 2 billion people of all races and religions.

Together, the countries of the Commonwealth are responsible for more than 20% of world trade, about 20% of investment and approximately 20% of world GDP. According to the Commonwealth Business Council (CBC), “over \$3 trillion in trade happens within the Commonwealth every year and the Commonwealth has seen over \$200 billion worth of investment over the last 10 years”.

This demonstrates that there is enormous potential within the Commonwealth for delivering benefits to its people, but Commonwealth leadership – in government and the private sector - must do something about it by exploiting to its fullest the vast potential for economic growth and social progress that it offers within the Commonwealth, and for contributing to global problem solving.

The CBC also points out that 5 Commonwealth countries – Singapore, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia – are in the top 10 places to do business.

There is clearly an unlocked potential for boosting wealth in the Commonwealth by strict adherence to democracy and good governance by all Commonwealth countries that would encourage more trade and investment across the Commonwealth.

It has been pointed out that the legacy of a common language, common laws, in some cases a common crown, has brought down the price of doing business among Commonwealth countries by 20%. How much more would it be reduced – and how much more of it would occur, if Commonwealth values were upheld and respected everywhere imbuing greater confidence in investors.

Time has not allowed me to reflect on the full gamut of the EPG's work. I hope the areas I have neglected to cover will be addressed in our discussion.

I would like to end by saying that the members of the EPG have each come to this task from a background of deep and abiding commitment not only to the idea of the Commonwealth, but also to the great potential for global good that is inherent in this magnificent gift we now share, and with which we could do a great deal to benefit all.

We believe, as I know you do, that the Commonwealth has the potential to be a beacon to the world and to help the world to solve its collective problems.

Your support for our work, in all the ways that you can, would be most welcome.

Thank you.