



## **Report on Wilton Park Informal Consultation**

### **REINVIGORATING THE COMMONWEALTH**

**Wednesday 1 September 2010**

**in co-operation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London**

#### **Key Points**

1. The Commonwealth, the world's oldest political association of sovereign nations with membership across the globe, spanning races and major faiths, needs to adapt to a vastly changed international landscape. At the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, leaders called for the creation of an Eminent Persons' Group (EPG) to undertake an examination of options for reform. The EPG's recommendations should ensure "the Commonwealth will remain relevant to its times and people in future" and will help build "a stronger and more resilient and progressive family of nations founded on enduring values and principles". London-based diplomats from a geographical range of Commonwealth member states, heads of Commonwealth organisations, and a member of the EPG met to discuss the options. The key conclusions were:

- The Commonwealth's strength lies in its commitment to shared values and principles, its networks, its common language and experience, all of which are reflected in its similar administrative and legal structures.
- The Commonwealth should not aim to do everything but identify where it adds value. In sharpening its focus and reducing the areas in which it is involved, it will avoid duplication and spreading its resources too thinly.
- While the EPG should discuss improving internal institutional mechanisms, it should also take account of the Commonwealth's multiple platforms and global networks, and consider ideas for best leveraging these networks to increase the impact of its work.
- In recent years, the Commonwealth has not been given sufficient recognition by some member governments, or the political commitment needed. With renewed interest, there is now a window of opportunity.

## **BUILDING ON THE COMMONWEALTH'S STRENGTHS**

### **Democracy, good governance and human rights**

2. There is general agreement that the Commonwealth's commitment to democracy, good governance, human rights and the rule of law are central to its credibility and relevance. These values are integrally linked to poverty alleviation, sustainable development and economic empowerment. Good governance will encourage investment, trade and growth. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) is seen as critical to upholding all Commonwealth values and taking action when member states are considered to have violated them. CMAG is currently reviewing its own work. To strengthen CMAG some suggest it should be empowered to act earlier and engage in dialogue when there are serious and persistent violations of Commonwealth values, rather than intervening once there has been unconstitutional overthrow of an elected government. Gradations of action could be envisaged. The Commonwealth community expects its inter-governmental machinery to be more effective in engaging with fragile situations. The Secretary-General, under his 'good offices' responsibility, could also play a larger preventative role. This raises the question of what means of early warning might trigger such action. The range of Commonwealth assets, used creatively, has large potential for conflict prevention and crisis management. For some, the Commonwealth has traditionally 'gone about its business quietly'; there is a need for careful analysis before acting.

3. Parliaments should play their full role in holding the executive accountable. Some suggest greater support should be provided to building the capacity of parliaments to enable fulfilment of their oversight function: the value of professional exchanges among parliamentarians should not be overlooked. While the Commonwealth has usefully observed elections, generally confined to the day of voting itself, greater involvement in the longer-term electoral process, for example through a network of electoral commissioners, could be valuable. Guidance on the quality of democracy, in handbook form, could be produced. An alternative approach could be compilation of a Commonwealth Charter, drawing on the values and principles agreed throughout the years by heads of government.

## **Economic development and trade within the Commonwealth**

4. It is estimated that some 20% of world trade is intra-Commonwealth. The common use of English, a global business language, cuts costs and provides significant comparative advantage. Some Commonwealth member states are among the fastest growing emerging economies. There is enormous potential for greater trade, growth and wealth creation across the Commonwealth. Some suggest establishing a Commonwealth Investment Fund, committed to supporting countries where good governance is demonstrated. The Commonwealth could aim to advance world trade negotiations. Engagement of the private sector is needed to secure greater growth and employment.

5. The Commonwealth can be a channel for development not so much by delivery of programmes but through its advocacy, strengthening commitment to development objectives and ensuring the right issues are addressed. With its standard setting among an extensive and varied membership, the Commonwealth constitutes a valuable repository of 'lessons learned' and can do more to share best practice. The range of Commonwealth networks could be hugely influential here.

## **Meeting the challenges of small states**

6. Almost two-thirds of Commonwealth membership can be regarded as small states. They value their voice in the Commonwealth, especially at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM), even if the CHOGM agenda may be overloaded and in need of radical restructuring. The Commonwealth could provide an inter-face for such states with other multilateral organisations, such as the G-20, World Trade Organisation or international financial institutions, where their specific concerns may need differential treatment. The Commonwealth could also facilitate information exchange and practical assistance to small or vulnerable member states on global and technological issues such as climate change and energy.

## **Engaging Commonwealth organisations and networks**

7. The Commonwealth is largely unknown to the broader public, beyond the Commonwealth Games and possibly CHOGM. Too often the Commonwealth is regarded solely as an intergovernmental organisation, and the rich array of

professional associations, including in the private sector, and civil society organisations are neglected. Existing networks can play a constructive role in helping to address contemporary challenges if they are given due recognition and their involvement is anticipated at an earlier stage than currently occurs. The potential of people-to-people links with Zimbabwe is an example. Practical means for coordination with social networks need to be found. They constitute added value in promotion and outreach, and communicating Commonwealth values.

8. Special investment should be made in youth networks. One possibility could be the creation of a 'Commonwealth Development Corps', enabling young people from across the Commonwealth, through voluntary service, gain a better knowledge and appreciation of others in a structured and organised programme. Support from Commonwealth universities would be enlisted, as well as from funding from external sources. Inclusion of women in networks and platforms should be actively promoted.

### **CREATING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS**

9. The Commonwealth, and in particular the Secretariat, has finite resources. Creating strategic partnerships with multilateral organisations, national governments, foundations and the private sector could contribute both funding and help the Commonwealth create greater impact for its work in sectors such as education and health.

### **THE COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT**

10. Since the 1990s, the budget of the Secretariat has been consistently reduced. The size of its staff is smaller than, for example, that of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). While some argue it should be better resourced, in the current economic climate this may not be realistic. In these circumstances, it is suggested the Secretariat be a 'facilitator' rather than 'administrator', with a more strategic approach embedded in upholding Commonwealth values and principles. At the same time, the Secretary General is not only the chief officer of the Secretariat, but should be the public face of the Commonwealth, and as such assume a higher public profile.

## **FUTURE PROSPECTS**

11. In establishing the EPG, with its clear mandate to examine options for reform of the Commonwealth, member states have a powerful tool for assuring the future relevance of the Commonwealth. Member states need to continue their political commitment, through full cooperation and engagement with the reform process, taking ownership of the EPG's final report and its implementation.

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