THE COMMONWEALTH: STANDING UP FOR WHAT IS RIGHT

The new Commonwealth Charter dispels the myth that this association of sovereign states is out-dated and sets continuing goals that all can use to hold it accountable, says the British Minister of State responsible for Commonwealth affairs.

Rt Hon. Hugo Swire, MP, in London.
Mr Swire is the United Kingdom Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office responsible for, among others, the Commonwealth. A Conservative Member of the House of Commons since 2001, he has held several posts including Opposition Whip and Minister of State for Northern Ireland. He previously worked in the arts and served in the U.K. Armed Forces.

I am very proud to be the United Kingdom Minister responsible for our relationship with the Commonwealth, taking over from Rt Hon. the Lord Howell of Guildford who was, and remains, committed to its future. This is an organization I passionately believe in, and one that has enormous potential to do good in the world. Commonwealth membership is based on shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. When we want to raise standards of human rights across the world, the Commonwealth and its networks can help to get the message out there and to take the lead in improving the way things are done.

A modern role
Over the last few years, there has been a great deal of discussion in the U.K. Parliament and the media about the need for modernization: to find a happy medium that encompasses the past and the present. We have been all too aware that if the Commonwealth cannot protect democracy and stand up for human rights, then it risks losing credibility and becoming untenable.

Our government strongly supports the Commonwealth’s efforts to increase its profile, relevance and effectiveness. We actively supported the strengthening of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group’s (CMAG) role so that it can take leadership on important issues.

For our government, Commonwealth values underpin everything we do and that is why I am so pleased that the Commonwealth has agreed to a Charter setting out those values. The Charter was presented to Her Majesty The Queen on Commonwealth Day, 11 March 2013, and was also laid before Parliament in the form of a Command Paper on 4 March.
The Charter marks an important milestone in the Commonwealth modernization process and the future of the organization. We want to ensure that the Commonwealth strengthens its role and relevance in today’s world. It needs to be an organization that has an impact, not just in business and politics but in making people’s lives better. What incentive could be more powerful than that?

Sixteen core values are set out in the Charter, all of which Commonwealth Leaders have committed their countries to upholding. These values cover, among others: upholding democracy and human rights, international peace and security, freedom of expression, promoting tolerance and respect, protecting the environment, providing access to health, education and food and recognizing the positive role that young people can play in promoting these and other values.

By outlining these values, the Commonwealth is ensuring that these commitments are clearly defined and accessible to everyone in the Commonwealth. If you are wondering why there is a Commonwealth, what it does and where it is going, there is now a place to see all of this laid out. It is part of our commitment to transparency; but it is also a vital part of cutting back on misconceptions and getting to the root of what matters.
A Commonwealth important to all

The Charter is an expression of member states’ commitment to the development of free and democratic societies and the promotion of peace and prosperity. Moreover, it acknowledges the important role that civil society plays in supporting the goals and values of the Commonwealth.

When I attended the Commonwealth Youth Forum in Papua New Guinea in April I saw this for myself. The Commonwealth is not about leaders and followers: it is about citizenship and talking to one another. There were some truly inspirational people there with ideas about how we can combat climate change, create sustainable development and engage people from smaller Commonwealth realms.

I was struck but just how young the Commonwealth is. This is no half-dead institution, but a living breathing body with words that resonate. People may not want to listen to political figures, but the voice of the future Commonwealth is altogether more appealing. The Charter is for them. It is a document they will need to be happy with if they are to modernize as they want to. And that is important to the future of the Commonwealth, where over 1 billion people are under the age of 25.

Agreement to the Charter was an important milestone in modernizing the Commonwealth: no mean feat when you consider that it represents over two billion of the world’s people, large and small countries, rich and poor. For 64 years we went along knowing what we believed in and assuming other members felt the same way.

By sitting down and agreeing a way forward we now know what matters to other countries and what we can do to make a difference.

All 54 sovereign and independent member states agreed to this and they attach real importance to it. This is not least because the Commonwealth provides a consensus-based forum for Commonwealth member states to improve the common interests of their peoples, promote international understanding and allow them to influence international society. It is not just another document. It is now the document of the Commonwealth.

Clear standards for accountability

The Charter has been adopted at a time in which the world is rapidly changing: new trade and economic patterns are opening up whilst there is an increased worldwide surge in popular demands for democracy and human rights. Consequently, the need and the potential for the Commonwealth as a network for effective co-operation and promoting development have never been greater. The creation of a Commonwealth Charter which sets
out the clear goals and principles of the Commonwealth will ensure that the Commonwealth remains relevant and accessible to all, and provides a useful means to protect and promote core democratic values in the years to come.

The values within the Charter are those which member nations consider important enough to enshrine in a single document to which all Commonwealth member nations subscribe. These commitments should be upheld, adhered to and kept under review, not just by Commonwealth member states and Parliamentarians, but by individuals and civil society organizations. This in turn will make the Commonwealth stronger and make sure individuals can hold Commonwealth member states to account.

It would be misleading to say that all Commonwealth countries already adhere, without exception, to every value identified in the Charter. However, by setting them out and agreeing to them we are on the road to ensuring that they become common currency across the Commonwealth. This is the start but it is not the end, and we will keep refining our work and defining our values as the years go on.

Looking to Sri Lanka
These values will of course be a central focus of this year’s Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Sri Lanka. I am aware that 2013’s CHOGM is not without its controversies. Ahead of the meeting in Colombo we will look to Sri Lanka to demonstrate its commitment to upholding Commonwealth values of good governance and respect for human rights. We must all pull together with a common agenda, especially as we work towards implementing a new Strategic Plan for 2013-2016 and push forward with post-2015 educational development goals.

As we have said before, we believe that change comes from within. We want to be a leading voice in the Commonwealth and to encourage Sri Lanka to make the changes being called for in order to promote peace.

This is an area in which the Commonwealth has a wealth of experience. It has observed over 70 elections since 1990, and on each occasion provided a trusted, objective judgement on the credibility of the electoral process and submitted recommendations on how to improve elections in the future.

The Commonwealth has also taken a leading role in promoting gender equality and getting women an equal voice across the world.

A strong relationship for trade, Games and co-operation
Yes, there are changes to be made. With the collective weight of the Commonwealth, we shouldn’t be surprised that some, including the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons, think it is an organization that should do better. They are right. We all want a strong Commonwealth that makes the most of its considerable assets.

But the important thing to take away from the Charter is that the Commonwealth is changing and that it has a future. Trade, for example, is booming. Research conducted by the Royal Commonwealth Society found that when two trading partners were Commonwealth members, their trade was likely to be a third to a half more than when one or both trade partners was non-Commonwealth. There is clearly the potential to build on this in 2013 and beyond.

We also have Glasgow’s Commonwealth Games to look forward to in 2014. This will be the third time that Scotland has hosted the Games, and we are working closely with the Scottish government to make sure they are a success.

Sport offers a chance to promote the key values of the Commonwealth, with a strong emphasis on engaging our youth.

We are confident that the Glasgow Games will make a significant and positive contribution to the future success and prosperity of the Commonwealth.

Above all though, in the year of the Charter, we can be confident that there is a will to develop and improve the Commonwealth. Members share principles of democracy, rule of law, good governance and similar legal systems.

These provide solid foundations for strong relationships. Together we share a long and rich history, and together we can make sure that the future is richer still.