



**Distinguished Lecture: 'Democracy and Diversity – A People's Commonwealth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'**

Middlesex University



**18:00-20:00, 10 December 2018**

Mr Akbar Khan, Secretary-General of the  
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

**Remarks**

## Opening remarks

Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen. Good evening.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this lecture on the theme of *Democracy and Diversity – A People’s Commonwealth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

I would like to firstly extend my sincere thanks to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Tim Blackman, for his kind introduction and generous invitation to deliver this lecture this evening. I also extend my gratitude to Middlesex University for their hospitality and hosting of this seminar on a topic, which I believe to be of particular significance and relevance, in light of the growing public and political interest in the nature and role of the Commonwealth as the United Kingdom exits the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me start by painting a quick picture of our 21<sup>st</sup> century Commonwealth for those who may be less familiar with it.

Today, our Commonwealth comprises 53 diverse states, developed and developing, strong and weak, island and landlocked, mostly but not exclusively former British colonial territories bound together by shared political values, history, language, institutions representing 2.3 billion people, a third of the world’s population. Importantly, 60% of the Commonwealth’s population are young people below the age of 30 years.

Whether one of the largest or one of the smallest in our Commonwealth family, the principle of equality of states applies and is reinforced by the operating procedures which places a ‘consensus-based approach’ at the heart of decision making.

This has the advantage that the smallest and the least powerful do not have to suffer the tyranny of the majority.

Some of our countries are some of the fastest growing economies in the world whilst others are some of the smallest and most vulnerable and marginalised. The membership of the Commonwealth, unlike many regional economic blocs and political associations, transcends the perceived ‘North versus South’ dichotomy.

And of course, in every family, there are sometimes quarrels or differences of views from time to time and the Commonwealth family is no different from any family.

In this context, some of our countries have left the Commonwealth club. Many have come back. Pakistan left in 1972 and rejoined in 1989. The Gambia is the most recent example. Left in 2013 and rejoined earlier this year. Maldives left in July 2017 and has indicated its intention to rejoin.

Several other territories countries such as Toga and Somaliland have also expressed interest in joining the Commonwealth.

In light of these positive developments, I would suggest that the Commonwealth of Nations is far from the irrelevant historical anachronism that critics have painted it as being. Rather, I would echo one former Australian PM who described the Commonwealth as ‘a softpower network which represents the realities of a changing world’.

Lord Howell, a former FCO Minister of State for the Commonwealth has stated, the Commonwealth is not just about governments, rather it is an all-powerful ‘network concept’ comprising many Commonwealth grouping of peoples, businesses and civil society. In other words, it is peoples driven: a network of peoples and societies as much as of governments and States, possibly even more. It is a generator of soft power linkages and contacts on an unparalleled scale.<sup>1</sup>

*So, the question many of you may be asking is – how did we get there and what sort of international organisation is the Commonwealth?*

The answer to this lies in our shared history and the remarkable genius of the Commonwealth to remain enduring based on its inherent flexibility and agility to changing global circumstances.

In my diplomatic legal career, I have had the opportunity and privilege to work closely with a variety of international organisations committed to promoting democracy and development, human rights and the rule of law. I am of course biased to some extent, but I have found no other international organisation like the Commonwealth.

It is less hierarchical and importantly the Commonwealth we see today is not as a result of some great design and plan from our Commonwealth leaders, rather the Commonwealth has evolved.

As Lord Howell has put it: it has not been planned but has happened; it requires a different type of mindset as it is a network; it has no centre but rather its centre is everywhere. What is distinctive and unique about the Commonwealth is its people-centred approach. People are not only the beneficiaries of democracy and development but importantly directly contribute to these outcomes as key actors and enablers.

The strength of the Commonwealth lies not only in the membership of governments but significantly in its Commonwealth grouping of peoples, businesses and civil society networks which together constitute the Commonwealth as a unique international family and a uniquely positioned global actor.

One of the key non-governmental networks in the Commonwealth is my own Association, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, or the parliamentary network of the Commonwealth, now in its 107<sup>th</sup> year. This network works closely with Parliaments and Legislatures, to connect, develop, promote and support Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth which includes free and fair elections, democratic governance, separation of powers, youth engagement, gender equality and the rule of law.

Within the Commonwealth family, the CPA is but one of nearly 80 or more people-centred societies, institutions, professional associations, organisations and charities all working towards the improvement of people's lives within our Commonwealth. These entities often exist quietly "*below the radar of wider public consciousness*".

The network of the People's Commonwealth is far from insignificant. This breadth of perspectives allows for new and necessary conversations to take place around issues such as global inequality, social and economic rights, the importance of peace-building and many more. This expansive, multilateral network of peoples, civil society and governments has allowed the Commonwealth to harness and project considerable amounts of soft power capital.<sup>2</sup>

Often, this reliance on soft power has been used to criticise the Commonwealth as benign and toothless, with no power of sanction and lacking in hard power.

I would argue that this is precisely the strength of the Commonwealth as, for all its perceived lack of hard power, it can offer member states the benefits that come from positive dialogue and engagement on issues of democracy, good governance, human rights and socio-economic development.

There is a place for a decent values-driven organisation that in the words of the former Commonwealth Secretary-General His Excellency Kamallesh Sharma raises a helping hand, rather than a rebuke or sanction when a country is in difficulty.

Its informality and flexibility and ability to bring diverse actors around a set of common values which act as the 'glue' that binds us together is an inherent part of the Commonwealth's strength and endurance.

When speaking with one voice, the Commonwealth is truly a global force for good, bringing a richness of its diversity and geographical reach to solve issues and identify new opportunities. This was seen in the 80s and 90s when the Commonwealth stood against apartheid and also negotiated with the international financial institutions to reduce small states' indebtedness.

As Secretary-General of one of the oldest Commonwealth organisations, I can testify that these benefits are real and keenly felt across the Commonwealth.

This point was, arguably, best articulated by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, in the month following the agreement of the London Declaration in 1949. He said that:

*“We join the Commonwealth obviously because we think it is beneficial to us and to certain causes in the world that we wish to advance. The other countries of the Commonwealth want us to remain there because they think it is beneficial to them. It is mutually understood that it is to the advantage of the nations in the Commonwealth and therefore they join. At the same time, it is made perfectly clear that each country is completely free to go its own way”.*<sup>3</sup>

The Commonwealth providing a forum for effective dialogue and shared mutual benefits has been made all the more important by the increasing focus of the international community on the development agenda, first with the Millennium Development Goals and now with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Commonwealth is uniquely placed to deliver on this modern agenda. Former Commonwealth Secretary-General, Mr Kamallesh Sharma, has previously claimed that *“the Commonwealth’s first constituency is its most vulnerable”*<sup>4</sup>, pointing to the fact that, during his time in office, more than 500 million Commonwealth citizens lived on one dollar a day.

Mr Sharma further pointed out that the Commonwealth contains a disproportionate share of the world’s unschooled and unemployed population and a large number of people living with HIV/AIDS.

Whilst an enormous amount of work remains to be done to address these issues, the Commonwealth has made progress and stands to do more, having recognised that *“sustainable development can help to eradicate poverty by pursuing inclusive growth and committing itself to removing wide disparities and unequal living standards”*.<sup>5</sup>

This commitment has seen, for example, the convening of a Commonwealth Workshop on “*Toolkits for Effective Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals*”<sup>6</sup> aimed at helping countries achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other internationally agreed targets.

The Commonwealth has also proposed a set of principles for sustainable ocean development<sup>7</sup>, contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 14 on the sustainable use and conservation of the oceans. In discussing achieving the SDGs, we cannot ignore the importance of promoting deeper integration at the regional level achieved through trade.

Impressive trade agreements involving advanced and developing economies within the Commonwealth have been concluded in recent years, including the *Southern African Development Community – EU Economic Partnership Agreement*, which was finalised and implemented in 2016. The issue of trade and regional co-operation among the Commonwealth is perhaps most keenly observed in the context of ‘Brexit’. With the UK set to withdraw from the European Union, there may be increased opportunities for greater integration with Commonwealth countries.

UK–Commonwealth trade linkages are already strong. The combined value of Commonwealth countries’ exports to the UK plus the UK’s exports to other Commonwealth members grew from approximately 57 billion US dollars in 2000 to around 85 billion dollars in 2016; and reached a peak of 120 billion dollars in 2012 before being affected by the global trade slowdown.<sup>8</sup>

A recent study undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat noted that, although the Commonwealth was itself not a trading club, and therefore unable to offer preferential

advantages between member states, there was nonetheless a ‘Commonwealth advantage’ to intra Commonwealth trade. The study showed that trading costs were around 19% lower when both trading partners were members of the Commonwealth. This has been largely put down to common standards, legal structures, commercial methods, numerous soft power linkages and, above all, a common working language.

The uncertainty of Brexit may, therefore, provide more mutual benefits and scope for dialogue and cooperation within our uniquely constituted Commonwealth.

***“...the enduring nature of the Commonwealth...” – development of the Commonwealth***

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Earlier I mentioned about the ‘enduring’ nature of the Commonwealth as part of its historical development. When discussing the *enduring nature* of the Commonwealth, it is useful to recall the Irish historian Nicholas Mansergh, writing nearly 50 years ago in 1969, who said “*the Commonwealth was not the product of political abstraction but of a succession of historical developments*”<sup>9</sup>.

Similarly, Indian historian Krishnan Srinivasan has more recently argued that the Commonwealth “*was never created and perhaps never could have been created in this form*”.<sup>10</sup>

I would argue, however, that the perspective of the Commonwealth as a product of historical circumstance and coincidence over design is only partially true. This is because such a conclusion risks overlooking the foundation of the Modern Commonwealth, the **London Declaration of April 1949**.

To provide some background and context to the London Declaration, India had, on the morning of 15 August 1947, emerged as an independent Dominion within the then *British Commonwealth*. This was a direct result of, the passing of the *Indian Independence Act* of 1947 by the British Parliament which, among a number of other provisions, sought to divide British India into two independent Dominions *to be known respectively as India and Pakistan*.<sup>11</sup>

Cognizant of the intentions of India to become a republic, and the steps being taken in drafting the Indian Constitution, the **1949 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference** was dominated by the issue of India's future relationship with the Commonwealth.

Prior to the 1949 Conference, the Commonwealth had been an association of Britain and British dominions, united through a shared constitutional link of having the British sovereign as head of state. Accordingly, the question was whether a Commonwealth state could become a sovereign independent Republic but remain a member state of the Commonwealth.

On 28 April 1949, the London Declaration was issued. It stated the following:  
*“The Government of India have [...] declared and affirmed India's desire to continue her full membership of the Commonwealth of Nations and her acceptance of The King as the symbol of the free association of its independent member nations and as such the Head of the Commonwealth.*

*“The Governments of the other countries of the Commonwealth, the basis of whose membership of the Commonwealth is not hereby changed, accept and recognise India's continuing membership in accordance with the terms of this declaration”.*

The brilliance of the Declaration lies not just in its drafting which, in fewer than 150 words, effectively and concisely communicated the precedent for future membership of the Commonwealth for non-Dominions, the role of the *Head of the Commonwealth*, and the renaming of the Commonwealth from the *British Commonwealth* to the *Commonwealth of Nations*.

This flexibility and foresight has seen membership of the Commonwealth grow from its eight founding members to 53 states today, accounting for a third of the world's population, a quarter of UN Member States and a fifth of all international trade, even as the British Empire shrank ever smaller in the post-war period.

It is this willingness and ability to adapt to contemporary issues and emerging threats and provide flexibility to members that has allowed the Commonwealth of Nations to not only survive, but thrive well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Speaking about the 1949 London Declaration, which King George VI accepted voluntarily as the Head of the Commonwealth, he said: *"The problem of which you have just offered me your solution is one that has given us all very grave concern. The solution is a striking example of the elasticity of our system."*

***"... a People's Commonwealth which is democratic and diverse in nature." – democracy and the CPA in the Commonwealth***

The evidence of the Commonwealth as a forum for effective dialogue and shared mutual benefits was nowhere more apparent this year than at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, or CHOGM, held in London this April.

The 2018 CHOGM highlighted how the priorities of the Commonwealth reflect its composition, as all democratic institutions should. It was during this high-level forum that the Commonwealth signed up to the Blue Charter, an action plan on protecting the ocean from the effects of climate change, pollution and over-fishing, in recognition of the concerns of vulnerable small island developing states.<sup>12</sup>

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has, similarly, recognised the need to protect our small Branches, of which we have 43, from the effects of climate change through the work of our Small Branches network. This included the hosting of a **CPA Small Branches Climate Change Workshop** in Kenya this October to assist the CPA's Small Branches to tackle their specific challenges in overseeing the implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement and in the development of appropriate national legislation dealing with the prevention and mitigation of climate change.

Recognising the rights, needs and aspirations of half its population, the Commonwealth was also among the earliest adopters of gender-specific programmes within its operations. This is a commitment which continues to this day, as demonstrated at the Commonwealth Women's Forum during the 2018 CHOGM.

Similarly, at the CPA, we are immensely proud of the work that is done by our Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians network for improved representation of women in legislatures and for furthering gender equality across the Commonwealth.

It is further evidence of the collaborative nature of the Commonwealth that the CPA and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum worked together at the Commonwealth Women's

Forum at CHOGM to deliver a session highlighting the importance of women's representation at all levels of political life.

### **Closing remarks**

In concluding this lecture, I have discussed many facets of our Commonwealth landscape, but I hope I have conveyed the basic tenet of this lecture, namely, that 'our Commonwealth' belongs to each and every one of us as Commonwealth citizens serving as a 'Commonwealth of the People' committed to common ideals and principles despite diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities. In this regard, we must never forget the opening words of the Commonwealth Charter - '*We the People of the Commonwealth .....'*'

Thank you.

### **ENDS – updated version**

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#### **REFERENCES:**

<sup>1</sup> Taken from 'The Commonwealth Transformed by Lord David Howell

<sup>2</sup> Use of the term '*soft power capital*' is informed by a number of publications, including '*Britain's Global Future: Harnessing the soft power capital of UK institutions*', Philip Blond, James Noyes and Duncan Sim - available at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/britains-global-future-harnessing-the-soft-power-capital-of-uk-institutions>

<sup>3</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20131109080743/http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol8p1.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1758-5899.2010.00065.x>

<sup>5</sup> <http://thecommonwealth.org/commonwealth-charter-section/sustainable-development>

<sup>6</sup>

<http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/CommonwealthWorkshopToolkitsEffectiveSDGImplementationFinal%20Report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/game-changing-blue-charter-guide-nations-sustainable-ocean-development>

<sup>8</sup>

[http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Strengthening\\_the\\_Commonwealth\\_9781849291798\\_UPD\\_F.pdf](http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Strengthening_the_Commonwealth_9781849291798_UPD_F.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Mansergh, N. (1969) *The Commonwealth Experience* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Srinivasan, K. (2001) *The Commonwealth, India and Lost opportunities in South Asia*, Asian Affairs, 32(2).

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1947/30/pdfs/ukpga\\_19470030\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1947/30/pdfs/ukpga_19470030_en.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Blue\\_Charter\\_07062018.pdf](http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Blue_Charter_07062018.pdf)