



The Commonwealth Association

Report for the period from June 2019 to September 2020

This has been a particularly difficult year for the Commonwealth Association, culminating in the grievous loss of our Chair, Patsy Robertson (see below). The prolonged refurbishment of Marlborough House and the onset of coronavirus has also played havoc with our activities. With the infection figures for the latter rising again, the medium to long term impact on us is difficult to predict.

The Association usually holds its Annual General Meeting at the end of June or the beginning of July. Owing to the coronavirus it was not possible to do this in 2020 and it is being held online instead in November. As a result, this report covers the period from June 2019 to September 2020 rather than the usual twelve-month period.

Patsy Robertson

We record with huge regret the death on 18 August of our founding Chair, Patsy Robertson. Patsy was a wonderful person, an inspiring leader for the Association and will be hugely missed. As the Vice-Chair, Stuart Mole has stepped in as the Acting Chair until the AGM.

Many members used our email system to record their memories of Patsy and their appreciation of all that she did for the Commonwealth over many years.

Owing to the coronavirus it was not possible for Patsy's funeral to be a large event, but arrangements were made by the family for others to watch it online. Dharani Rethnam, who worked with Patsy for many years, was invited to attend by the Robertson family and arranged flowers for the event. It is hoped that a major (post-Covid) event in her memory can be held next year. In the meantime, the Executive Committee has decided that the zoom AGM on 17 November should be followed by "A Reflection on the Life of Patsy Robertson". This will be

opened by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland QC. Contributions are being arranged from all parts of the Commonwealth Association.

The two Commonwealth Secretaries-General with whom Patsy worked professionally sent the following messages:

Shridath Ramphal

The Commonwealth sky clouded over as Patsy Robertson left us an hour ago. She had given her life to the Commonwealth - from the Secretariat's beginning to her own end. I shared many years of the Commonwealth story with Patsy and attest to her unbounded devotion to the truest causes for which the Commonwealth stood; and I pay tribute to the service she gave over all the years - through the Secretariat and the Association and beyond - to the Commonwealth. I acknowledge my personal debt to her for all our work together world-wide and pay homage to the memory of her service. May Patsy rest in peace and the Commonwealth fulfil the highest purposes to which she dedicated her life.

Emeka Anyaoku

Patsy was not at the conception of the modern Commonwealth with the London Declaration of 1949 but she was at its birth in July 1965 when its independent collective machinery, the Commonwealth Secretariat (and Foundation), was established by its then member governments. I met Patsy some nine months later when I joined the team in 1966 and we remained colleagues for almost 25 years thereafter until her retirement from Marlborough House.

I remember Patsy as a true symbol of the modern Commonwealth who served the organization with passion and unflinching dedication during her many years in office at the Secretariat, and afterwards as a driving force at the Commonwealth Association of former Secretariat staff.

By the passing of Patsy Robertson, the Commonwealth has lost a devotee who worked throughout with singular fervor to support its structures, and who never minced words in criticizing actions or pronouncements by governments that she perceived as undermining the principles and values that animate the modern Commonwealth. May her soul rest in peace.

Keeping in touch

Many members value the Association because it enables them to keep in touch with people with whom they shared at least part of their working lives. Meetings and parties have always played a major part in this, but this has not been possible for much of this year. The reception which usually follows the AGM is particularly missed.

Discussions on Commonwealth topics have also been a major aspect of our activities. The Executive Committee intended to hold a major meeting on the future of the Commonwealth with speakers on both sides of the debate. In the end this event did not take place, because of the prolonged refurbishment of Marlborough House and the onset of Covid. We may revive the idea and hold it using Zoom.

Our email system, operating as a Google Group, enables members to keep in touch wherever they are and has been particularly important this year. During the period under review more than 300 emails were posted on about 150 topics and there has been some lively and occasionally heated discussion. They have varied in content, including news about what is happening at the Secretariat, updates on the activities of individual members and former staff members, information on Commonwealth-related events being organised by other bodies, and, given the nature of our members, the occasional obituary. Many members find the email group an essential way of keeping in touch.

Reviewing how we operate

The Executive Committee has begun a review of how the Association operates.

Membership of the Executive Committee

Our Constitution allows us to have up to five members of the Committee other than the officers and in addition to co-opt three further members on an annual basis.

During the year Domini Bingham and William Rezel decided that other commitments meant that they did not have time to continue on the

Committee. We thank them for all they have done for the Association and wish them well.

At the start of the year, the Committee was pleased to co-opt Shobhna Rattansi and Sherill Burton. We are grateful to both. Sherill has since decided that she for personal reasons she is unable continue on the Committee.

Meetings

We have started to use Zoom for Executive Committee meetings and this AGM is being held online. We see online activities as an essential part of our activities in future and an important way of keeping in touch with members who live outside the UK and, possibly, a way of increasing their number. The timing of meetings will need to take into account the differing time zones where our members live.

Publicity

Work is underway on a new website, which will allow us to raise our profile. Our old website had not been updated for some years owing to technical problems. It has now been taken down and the new website will provide information on our activities for the public and prospective members, a record of our activities since the establishment of the Association and a facility for members to express their views on current Commonwealth topics. We will include audio and visual material as much as possible. The website will include current contact details and should be up and running by the end of the year.

For some time there has been concern that the Association's name does not describe what we are and what we do. We have therefore adopted a strapline which explains our purpose - *Staying engaged - promoting and fostering the Commonwealth*. This was the result of consultation with members by email.

Membership

There are 175 people on our mailing list, but by the end of September 2020, only 74 of these have paid subscriptions for the current year. We are very concerned about this and are working to improve the situation. We are encouraging those who have not paid to get up to

date. Those who do not wish to do this will no longer be on the mailing list and will not receive the steady flow of emails. They will also not be able to participate in our activities.

We are looking at the use of a computerised membership database system to enable us to keep track of members more easily, to generate reminders and produce reports.

We are also revising our leaflet and application form, which will be on our website and more widely available when completed.

Interacting with other Commonwealth organisations

Several members played a role in the meetings of the Independent Forum of Commonwealth Organisations, including attending meetings of the Secretary-General with representatives of accredited organisations. We are represented on the Steering group of IFCO by Dr Bishaka Mukherjee.

During the year, IFCO has:

- Finalised its governance document
- Worked on the five Rwanda CHOGM themes, which have been revised in the light of Covid. They will be further reviewed and discussed with the Secretariat and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in January/February 2021, in time for the new CHOGM date in June 2021.
- Visited the Commonwealth Unit of FCO to receive regular updates on CHOGM and UK Chair-in-Office activities and, in the light of developments, to consider the implications for the Commonwealth of the DfID/FCO merger.
- Been involved in drafting an IFCO position and statement on racism, decolonisation and Black Lives Matter. IFCO will now be putting together a group of Commonwealth organisations to work on a process for addressing the issues of racism.
- Updated its website.

- The Association has also been in the very early stages of working with *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* on a conference "Decolonising the University and its curriculum: the challenge for the Commonwealth" which was due to take place at the University of Birmingham in April 2020. Owing to Covid, work on the conference was suspended. It may be that, in the light of the BLM movement and related matters, we may broaden out the subject area to look more generally at the Commonwealth and its colonial legacies.

Relations with the Social Club

The Association joined with the Secretariat's Social Club to hold a party to celebrate the Club's 50th anniversary. Members of the Association, including Patsy Robertson, were founding members of the Club. It was a lively event which enabled current members of staff to meet their predecessors. It was also one of the last social events to be held in Quadrant House, which is no longer used by the Secretariat.

Stuart Mole
Acting Chair

David Blake
Secretary

1 November 2020