



THE COMMONWEALTH ASSOCIATION

Chair's Report, 2020/2021

It does not seem a year since our last 'zoom' AGM and, in truth, it is not. Our 2020 AGM was postponed from its usual summer slot both by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the untimely death of our founder and late Chair, Patsy Robertson. This report therefore covers the period of eight months since November 2020 so that we can return to our usual – and constitutionally required – timings of a July AGM. The result of a short year and the continuing restrictions on our activities will therefore make this a briefer report than usual.

1. Remembering Patsy Robertson and other former colleagues

I am sure that all who knew Patsy will continue to feel her absence. Last November we were able to hold an online celebration of Patsy's life, including her work with the Commonwealth, and the recordings and images of this moving event will have a special place on our new website. A number of members expressed the hope that we could find a lasting way of recognising Patsy's formidable legacy. As a first step, the Executive Committee enthusiastically accepted a proposal that the talk after the AGM, with a guest speaker, should become the annual Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture. I am therefore delighted that the inaugural lecturer, after the 2021 AGM, will be Dr Anne Gallagher AO, the Director-General of the Commonwealth Foundation.

Sadly, the last eight months have seen the passing of other former colleagues (whether CA members or not) and we hold in our thoughts those we have lost, including Karen McKenzie, (Owek) Joseph Musisi, Brenda Holland and Sanjivi Sundar, and grieve with their families.

2. Renewing our Governance

a) ExCo's new membership

Patsy's passing gave me the difficult task of following in her footsteps as the new Chair of the Association. While I am indisputably 'old blood', I am pleased that the Executive Committee has been infused with welcome 'new blood'. Bishakha Mukherjee has been serving since the last AGM as Vice-Chair and has provided invaluable support during that period. Godson Okafor, Shobhna Rattansi and Sree Vallipuram joined the ExCo as elected members last November; and Lorna McLaren (recently retired from ComSec) and Felix Samuel were co-opted to the Committee in the New Year. David Blake is a mainstay of the organisation as the CA's Secretary and Richard Sisson takes care of our finances with the dedication and precision we have come to expect. Sadly, Sharon Robinson has decided to

step down from the Committee, after many years, but has agreed to be our Returning Officer for our annual elections, assisted by Dharani Rethnam. Sharon has always been a galvanising influence and a source of new ideas, and we are very grateful for the long service she has given.

b) Revising the Constitution

The effect of an Executive Committee refreshed by new membership and the curtailing of the Association's usual activities by the pandemic has led to a focus on 'housekeeping'. Rather as lockdown has led some to paint the garden shed or reorganise the larder, so ExCo has felt that now was the time to consider the internal health of the organisation. Our foundational document, in this respect, is the CA's Constitution. First adopted in June 2003, shortly after the CA's birth, the constitution was revised in 2008 and 2009, but not in the twelve years since. The constitutional revisions which are due to be proposed to the 2021 AGM are, it is hoped, entirely non-controversial and simply involve an updating of the document to reflect recent changes, including the arrival of virtual meetings! There is also a short document on electoral procedures which will be presented for approval. In time-honoured Commonwealth tradition, our decision-making is invariably by consensus, but we are also democrats and we need to be clear about voting arrangements, even if these are rarely used.

c) Officer/Committee responsibilities

A second 'lockdown' task has been to develop a comprehensive set of role descriptions for the officers of the Association and for elected committee members. This has been a useful exercise in also identifying other necessary roles, including the need for a Membership Officer and for a Returning Officer. As the new website becomes operational, it may be that the work that Shobhna Rattansi is doing alongside David Blake will need to be formalised into a Website Editor (in addition to the Administrator). The full set of responsibilities will be posted on the website once this goes 'live'.

3. Communicating with members and supporters

a) The new website

A vital but overdue task has been to revamp our website, both as a means of communicating with our membership and also as a dynamic way of presenting our mission to a wider public. Working with Prater Raines, David Blake has taken on the very considerable task of transferring across still valuable material from the old website, writing or commissioning new material, consulting the committee and liaising with our website providers. Latterly, as mentioned above, he has had valuable support from Shobhna Rattansi who will in future be responsible for developing, editing and uploading new content. We expect the new website to be inaugurated at the 2021 AGM.

b) Recruiting and publicity leaflet

The printed word also still has a place, and a publicity leaflet is in the final stages of production, in anticipation of our return to in-person gatherings and meetings. This will be additionally available in electronic form on the website.

c) Members and supporters

A major means of communication with members and supporters has been through the 'comassoc' network. This enables David Blake to post news of interest on a regular basis, including articles, media coverage and bereavements. From time to time, the network can also be used for lively debate and comment. Given that this is a 'family' network, the distinction between member and supporter has inevitably become rather blurred. Since some subscribe as members while others prefer a looser arrangement, the Committee felt it would be helpful to clarify the distinction between the two. Our records are therefore being updated to check that annual subscriptions are current and that where there are arrears, these are paid, or membership discontinued. In terms of regular communications, we intend that members in future will receive a dedicated stream of material relating to their membership while there will be a separate channel, for members and supporters, which will contain more general material.

d) Finance

A heartening feature of the past year has been the way that subscription income has been maintained. Since we have had very little opportunity for expenditure, particularly in hosting in-person events, this has contributed to a very healthy balance sheet at the end of the 2020 financial year. However, significant bills will soon need to be met, for example for the new website, for the publicity leaflet and for added zoom capacity. If we are able to host 'live' events once more, we can expect regular patterns of expenditure to resume, not least in sustaining the new Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture series, as well as further advocacy projects.

4. Working with Others

Despite the pandemic, the CA has strengthened its links with partner organisations, including the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, The Round Table and others. In particular, the CA (through our representative Bishakha Mukherjee) has been closely involved with the Independent Forum for Commonwealth Organisations (IFCO) in preparatory work for the Rwanda CHOGM (now postponed for a second time). This has involved much drafting and technical input. Either Bishakha or I have been regular attendees at the Secretary-General's periodic consultations with Commonwealth organisations.

5. Tackling Commonwealth issues

The CA has campaigned on two important issues in recent months. These are:

a) The threatened closure of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies ICwS)

In the latter part of 2020 (and as reported to the 2020 AGM), the University of London and the School of Advanced Study announced an imminent threat to the existence of the ICwS. The CA immediately joined a coalition of Commonwealth organisations lobbying the University, and others, in opposition to these plans. The Association also supported its Patrons, the four former Commonwealth Secretaries-General, in their own protests against the University's proposals. Despite some early job losses, the campaign recorded a partial success when the University withdrew its immediate threat to the ICwS and announced the appointment of a Review Group, headed by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, to explore the matter further and to report its conclusions by the middle of 2021. The CA has also made

representations to the Review Group and their report is expected to be delivered to the Vice-Chancellor at any moment.

b) Cuts to the UK Development Assistance budget

During the course of 2020, the UK government announced its intention of resiling from its legal commitment to maintain its annual spending on overseas development assistance at the 0.7% target of GNI set by the United Nations. The UK had met this target for the first time in 2013 and it was enshrined into law in 2015. For its part, the UK government argued that reducing the target to 0.5% of GNI – a cut of £4 billion - was a temporary measure necessitated by abnormal levels of public expenditure resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Critics have pointed out that these reductions had an immediate adverse effect on development programmes and were a 'double whammy' – a significant percentage cut in a cake that was already much diminished by a loss of output caused by the pandemic. Among those hardest hit by these cuts will be forty-seven Least Developed Countries, fourteen of whom are Commonwealth members. The pandemic has already had a grievous effect on extreme poverty, girls' education, health and climate change mitigation and these are precisely the areas where significant funding reductions will occur. A majority of donor (DAC) countries have increased, rather than reduced, their development assistance spending in the face of the pandemic, including an 8% increase by Canada. The CA argued to IFCO that this is an issue which we should carry forward to the Rwanda CHOGM and that all Commonwealth countries in a position to do so should step up their support internationally, rather than stepping away from their obligations. Given the postponement of CHOGM for a second time, the opportunities for Commonwealth debate are distant but, at the time of going to press, the UK government has just announced that a parliamentary vote will now be allowed on whether the cuts should be restored.

6. Planning for the Future

It is not at all certain that there is a clear path out of the pandemic, given the vast global inequalities in vaccination programmes and the spread of new infections. That certainly seems to be the mixed picture within the Commonwealth. In 2020, all 54 Commonwealth countries issued a stirring call to fight the pandemic. It is our hope that the rhetoric will now be followed by concerted action.

We hope for better times and wish continuing strength and resilience to all our members. But whatever 'new normal' materialises, we are likely to emerge into a very different world in many ways.

Stuart Mole

Chair

12 July 2021