

THE ENDURING COMMONWEALTH

Address to the AGM of the Commonwealth Association
Marlborough House, 4 July 2017

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It is wonderful to be back in the magnificent surrounds of Marlborough House, the site of so many historic Commonwealth moments. I am deeply honoured by the invitation of the Commonwealth Association to speak at your Annual General Meeting on the subject of the Enduring Commonwealth in Challenging Times. It makes the long journey from Australia worthwhile. Thank you Patsy and Cheryl for the invitation.

Let me stress at the outset that while I remain a serving and now senior member of the Australian Foreign Service (that means old), I speak in an entirely personal capacity and under strict Chatham House rules. My purpose is also to be constructive, not controversial. The Commonwealth has seen too much controversy - we don't need more tonight.

All of us here today have given much of our lives to the Commonwealth, either working here Marlborough House, or on the front lines of Commonwealth action around the world. Many of us still, in various ways, even in retirement or new areas of endeavour, continue to serve the spirit of Commonwealth.

Why did we do it? Why do we do it? Because in a world still riven by conflict and poverty, we care, and the Commonwealth has been a vehicle to demonstrate that care as "a compelling force for good", to quote our Commonwealth Charter.

Our work endures, and is still needed. After all the messes left for the Commonwealth at the end of the British Empire still require a lot of fixing up - and that is something we all know from practical experience. Will the Commonwealth itself endure? That depends. The work remains and the Commonwealth can endure as long as it has work to do. But it will only endure as long as those who contribute - its Secretariat, its leaders and above all its people - wish it to endure. I wish to address each of those three pillars of the Commonwealth in turn, and then leave you with one big idea.

Secretariat

Some years ago, on a cold and snowy evening in Cambridge when I was working for the Secretariat, I attended a talk by the late, great Peter Lyon. As always it was a masterful exposition on the Commonwealth. One point though sat uneasily with me at the time. Peter argued the future of the Commonwealth was in the hands of the Secretariat. With great respect to Peter, I questioned then and I disagree now.

Thankfully the future of the Commonwealth is not in the hands of the Secretariat or indeed the Secretary-General - it would be too much to ask of any organisation or individual. Rather it is in the hands of member governments and the people of the Commonwealth - and I will come to that. What the Secretary General and the Secretariat can do though is provide the convening power, the skills base and the right conditions which will assist the Commonwealth to work.

Above all in this regard the Secretariat needs to lead by example. It is important that its recruitment and management processes are fully open and transparent, with merit, performance, integrity and outcomes at the core of its values. It is crucial that the leadership style of all those in positions of authority is consultative, rather than directive, both internally and with member governments. After all to quote the Charter again "the Commonwealth way is to create consensus by consultation". This means travel, this means many meetings, this means putting personal ego aside as you help conflicted parties find solutions - but it works, as you and I know from personal experience.

As we look to the future we will probably see a smaller and smaller permanent Commonwealth Secretariat - perhaps with only a core staff of 100 - with the remainder provided on secondment by member governments or contract with specific projects funded by a range of organisations and governments, many working remotely or in overseas locations. It is the nature of work today and the impact of both the management philosophy and budget restrictions imposed by member governments. We should not bemoan the days of the big Secretariat when computers were unknown, but see how we can best support - and be part of - this new way of working.

That core staff though need to continue to come from the widest possible diversity of its membership and develop the highest standards of professionalism. One of the things many of us recall most fondly from our time here was the diversity and ability of our colleagues. Member governments need to be ready to second their best and brightest to work at the Commonwealth, bringing in a wealth of ideas and practice before going on to the highest positions in their home services, alongside those who may

give longstanding service to the Commonwealth. Here may I play particular tribute here to that diverse group of Sir Peter Marshall, Patsy Robertson and Amitav Banerji whose example should inspire a new generation.

The Secretariat needs also to embrace a culture of continuous reform and performance measurement, just as we do in member governments. An example of what needs to change is the CFTC, now over 40 years old. It has done great work, and the need for technical assistance continues. But the delivery model needs to modernise with a new Commonwealth Development Fund with a totally new approach negotiated with member governments in a way which fits modern circumstances. We cannot “revive the CFTC” nor should we even try. But much of the valuable work it did still needs to be done and we must find new ways of doing it and funding it.

This morning I spoke with the Secretary General, my friend Patricia Scotland. She is putting the Commonwealth back on the world stage and I know she is committed to the reform that will bring the changes the Secretariat and the membership need. Its been a tough start for her, but I am confident that as we work with her and she consults with us we will again see a united Secretariat, fit for purpose, and responsive its membership and leaders.

Leaders

Which brings me to the Leaders - our Heads of Government. For the Secretary General and Secretariat are only there to serve member governments and the Commonwealth people, not themselves. Without the commitment of the leaders of the Commonwealth it will soon cease to exist, even if the Secretariat works faultlessly. So far this commitment continues, but it can't be taken for granted. One test is always how many, in a crowded agenda of international meetings, turn up for CHOGM - our renamed Commonwealth Summit. This necessarily has evolved with the times to become shorter and more focused and outcomes oriented.

Why do they come? Of course meeting with our Head, Her Majesty the Queen is always a star attraction, and will be even more so next year, when they meet at Buckingham Palace. Over the years diverse leaders have asked me why come to CHOGM. The answer which has most resonated with them is that they can reach a diverse group of other leaders who they might not otherwise engage. That applies as much to leaders from small island states who want to engage G20 leaders, as it does to countries like Canada and Australia who need to meet leaders from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific to promote global agendas.

When they get there the thing they most hate is grappling with a Communique which has emerged full of square brackets from the COW. I personally think one of the best reforms we could have is to go back to the old rule that the outcomes document should only contain points the leader have raised themselves in the Executive Sessions and the Retreat. I understand from talking yesterday to Tim Hitchens, who heads the UK host team, the coming Commonwealth Summit is likely to see some good and imaginative improvements along these lines, and while providing for the usual people, youth and business events, it will be Leader focused.

What Leaders decide to discuss - climate change, terrorism, migration, sexual and gender based violence, governance, global trade - need not be circumscribed nor should the Commonwealth Secretariat need a program to follow up every issue. That is for the member governments to do with a wide range of international and regional bodies. The Secretariat's role should simply focus on its convening power and networking role - it is a connector not an implementer, a facilitator empowering members to maximise their own resources to effect.

As I reflect on what leaders want from the Commonwealth I am reminded of President Kagame of Rwanda. When I went to examine in 2006 whether Rwanda should join the Commonwealth, he argued persuasively that if Rwanda had been part of the Commonwealth the genocide would never have happened. It convinced me. Now it is beholden on the Commonwealth to ensure that Rwanda is provided with the support it needs.

Its never easy - in my time we grappled with Pakistan. Fiji, Sri Lanka, Solomon Islands, the Gambia, Maldives and of course Zimbabwe. Much remain works in progress but others are great achievements. Only last week the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands celebrated its winding up with great fanfare. Standing for principle is never easy and when it has led to suspension or the loss of a member it is painful.

Yet as we now look forward to the imminent return of the Gambia we are reminded of the importance of standing for principle. Other Commonwealth countries, encouraged by the Secretariat, must be ready to provide the necessary support to those leaders who as in the Gambia are seeking to rebuild their shattered democratic institutions.

Does this Commonwealth engagement work? Well currently I head the Middle East and Africa Division in DFAT. The Economist's "World in Conflict" lists 25 conflict situations in that part of the world. Only three are Commonwealth - Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda. We also know those three

with Commonwealth support are managing well conflicts which are primarily in their border regions. Eight - and these are amongst the most intractable such as Yemen, South Sudan and Iraq - might have been Commonwealth members. Res ipsa loquitur - the facts speak for themselves - the Commonwealth makes a difference.

People

Which now brings me to the Commonwealth of people, and our Commonwealth organisations and civil society bodies. Many of these existed before the Secretariat and indeed before regular Prime Ministers, later Heads of Government, meetings. Now I know from long experience that there are some real sensitivities about how the various organisations are described and the categories they are in.

However at the end of the day whether it is the Commonwealth Games Federation, or the CPA, or the CLGF, or the CMJA, or the RCS or the Commonwealth Nurses Federation, or even our own Commonwealth Association, what all our 80 plus Commonwealth badged bodies do is bring the Commonwealth together, and do great work.

I know that the UK as host is meeting with many of you to have your input into the Commonwealth agenda. This is important because the work all these organisations do is the very lifeblood of the Commonwealth. As we see in the future a smaller Secretariat and a more devolved Commonwealth, it is these groups that will be doing much of the practical work of the Commonwealth.

This is appropriate because through their myriad of networks and national groups they join the people of the Commonwealth to its purpose, and make it real. It is even very likely that should one day the formal Commonwealth wrap up many of these groups would continue.

I would also note that the Commonwealth Foundation has a particular convening role with many of the civil society organisations and professional associations. We need to ensure it is strengthened to play that role. I applaud the establishment of the Commonwealth Hub across the road to help in this regard. I hope it too can be strengthened and put on a firm financial footing.

Agenda

Which finally brings from the pillars of the Commonwealth to its agenda - its work. There is much that attracts Commonwealth attention, and that of its leaders, in the global agenda. Democracy building, Human Rights, Good Governance, Climate Change, Small States Challenges, Economic Development and the SDGs, World Trade, Health, Education, Youth, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, Migration - even I suppose the distraction of Brexit - all are important issues, and the Secretary General has rightly spoken to them.

Commonwealth nations should debate these issues and build consensus around them. The Secretariat though should not see that it has to have a program for every issue. Rather it should use its convening power to ensure Commonwealth countries become joined up, maximising their resources and working with the wider International community and relevant organisations in the Commonwealth family and beyond to address them.

Historically the Secretariat and the Commonwealth has worked best where it has one or two big ideas to work on. Of course democracy and development have always been at its core, and the subject of several reports and CHOGM declarations. Its work on election observing and building a shared democratic culture, and its work in providing advice to developing members to promote their economic and social development is essential. But this is not a big idea such as the struggle against fascism, the process of decolonisation and the fight against racism and apartheid which brought the Commonwealth together in the past - and sometimes even divided it.

For those who say there are no such issues today, I say look around you. The biggest challenge we face in the world today is violent extremism. I wake up every day to struggle with it. It is a pernicious ideology of the ill educated, given a false religious base, carried like a virus over the internet, which infects the minds of young people, draws them into savagery, and seeks to destroy the culture of centuries and promotes a nihilist view of the world. Here even in London we have been hurt constantly and recently by it.

The Commonwealth with its diversity of religions and cultures is ideally placed to address this destructive "ism" - the ism of our era. We can start by promoting widely - also over the internet and social media with youth - the positive Commonwealth values of respect for life, human and social rights, gender equality, freedom of expression, and building programs with member governments and beyond member government's to counter violent extremism. I am pleased that my country Australia has supported a small CVE Unit which is now established here at the Secretariat. However this is

just a start and it is something that I would argue should be mainstreamed across the Commonwealth's work.

So with that thought can I now conclude and thank you for your attention. Our Commonwealth still has much work to do. We may no longer be employees of the Secretariat, but all remain members of our Commonwealth family, with a responsibility to continue that work so long as we have breath in our bodies. Thank you.

This lecture was delivered by Matthew Neuhaus in a personal capacity and not as a serving diplomat.