



THE COMMONWEALTH ASSOCIATION

Staying engaged – promoting and fostering the Commonwealth

Chair's Report, 2021/2022

After the turbulence of the last few years, most particularly the impact of the pandemic, I am delighted that we plan to return to Marlborough House for our 2022 AGM and for the Second Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture. I am particularly grateful to the Commonwealth Secretary-General for once more allowing us, without charge, to use the fine rooms of the House for our AGM and lecture. Hazards remain but it will be good to return to meeting in person again, and seeing old friends and colleagues, even if zoom will now continue to be one of our standard operating mechanisms.

1. Remembering Patsy Robertson and other former colleagues

As members will recall, many had expressed the hope that we could find a lasting way of recognising Patsy's formidable legacy. The first step was the inauguration, last year, of an annual Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture. Our first lecturer was Dr Anne Gallagher AO, the dynamic Director-General of the Commonwealth Foundation, who gave a powerful and inspiring talk on "The People's Commonwealth." This year, we look forward to hearing from Rt.Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind KCMG, QC, the former UK Cabinet Minister and Foreign Secretary, who most recently has played a leading role in saving the Institute of Commonwealth Studies from closure. The topic of his lecture will be "What is the future of the Commonwealth?"

In addition to the lecture, at the 2021 AGM one of our number, Richard Bourne, proposed that we seek permission for the planting of a suitable tree in the grounds of Marlborough House, in memory of Patsy. She loved gardening and had fond memories of the house. It has taken many months to advance the initiative and to secure the necessary approvals. Ultimately, of course, the house is a royal palace, and a few weeks ago I was delighted to hear that the Queen has given her personal approval to the proposal. I hope that by the time we meet for our 2023 AGM, Richard's excellent idea will have become a reality.

Sadly, the roll call of those former colleagues we have lost in the course of the year (whether CA members or not) seems to be greater than ever. They include S.K. Rao, Lalage Bown, Hilary Perraton, Eileen Murtagh, Gurudas Bailur, Clyde Sanger, Md Tap Salleh, RoseMarie Endeley, Rosemarie Fernandopulle, Dawn Penso and Mihaela Smith. We mourn their passing and extend our condolences to their families.

2. Communicating with members and supporters

a) New members

Given that none of us is getting any younger, it is heartening to welcome several new members to our ranks. Through Lorna McLaren, our Membership Officer, we have been able to establish stronger links than in the past with the Secretariat's Human Resources section, which we hope will help recruitment of those leaving the Secretariat's employment. Similar links may be possible with the Foundation and other major Commonwealth organisations. Copies of our recruiting leaflet will be available at the AGM, and I urge those present to pick up copies and spread the word.

b) The new website

There has been much appreciation for the new website and congratulations are due to David Blake for the considerable amount of work he has invested in making all this happen, aided by Shobhna Rattansi. Shobhna has now taken on the role of website editor, in particular with the responsibility for developing, editing and uploading new content. Her latest initiative, inviting former staff to "Unlock Your Memories", is proving to be very popular.

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. This is something the ExCo will seek to progress in the course of the coming year.

3. 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 2022 Rwanda CHOGM. 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. Bishakha has also been elected to an advisory panel to monitor a study initiated and paid for by the Commonwealth Secretariat to assess the impact of Commonwealth organisations in pursuit of shared objectives. The consultant conducting the research and reporting his findings is the former Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, Vijay Krishnarayan.

In addition, Bishakha is representing the CA on a significant project for women's economic empowerment. She is working with the Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network (and other commercial partners) to develop a Commonwealth Women's entrepreneurship accelerator. The project seeks to enable high potential female-led businesses to grow their enterprises internationally, using the Commonwealth trade advantage. The programme will be developed across the Commonwealth, starting with the first cohort from fifteen countries representing the five Commonwealth regions.

4. The Institute of Commonwealth Studies

The 2020 AGM was told of a serious threat to the existence of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies by the University of London. By the time of the 2021 AGM, the immediate crisis had passed after the appointment by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Wendy Thomson, of a Committee of Inquiry into the Institute's future. This was chaired by Sir Malcolm Rifkind and the group contained many leading Commonwealth figures from a range of Commonwealth organisations. Fortunately, the Vice-Chancellor fully accepted the committee's highly positive report. The rebuilding of the Institute, drawing upon many recommendations put forward by the Rifkind Committee, has been made considerably easier by the appointment of Dr Sue Onslow as Interim Director. At the same time, the CA's Patrons, the four former Commonwealth Secretaries-General, have remained engaged and are providing valuable encouragement and support to Dr Onslow in her current task.

5. CHOGM and the future of the Commonwealth

Many would regard the biennial CHOGM as the 'beating heart' of the modern Commonwealth. It was therefore a relief, at the start of the year, to receive the news that the twice-postponed Rwanda CHOGM (accompanied by its various forums) would at last take place in Kigali from 20-26 June 2022.

a) Pre-CHOGM Conference: "Is the Commonwealth working?"

As part of the CA's contribution to the CHOGM process, I proposed to the Round Table that we and other Commonwealth organisations might be involved in a preparatory conference taking a critical look at the Commonwealth over four main areas, namely, leadership, values, networks and programmes/mandates. Hosted at Senate House by a reinvigorated Institute of Commonwealth Studies and with a number of former Secretariat and Foundation staff as panel speakers, this hybrid event attracted a heartening number of participants, both in person and online. A summary of its outcomes has been useful to Sue Onslow in preparing her evidence to the UK parliament in the aftermath of the CHOGM and the various conference sessions can be viewed by following the link on our website.

b) CHOGM attendance

As regards the CHOGM itself, the ExCo decided not to be formally represented at the CHOGM on this occasion. This was for a number of reasons. First, the arrangements for accreditation to the CHOGM, and the likely benefits which might be available, arrived late in the process and considerable uncertainty remained around how the CHOGM and its forums

would operate. Second, from its limited resources, the CA would only be able to make a token contribution to the expenses of a CA representative. Such a person's attendance would therefore have to be largely self-financing and would be considerable. However, several CA members were present in Kigali with other Commonwealth organisations, and we look forward to hearing of their experiences.

6. The Tonga earthquake and tsunami

Many members will recall that, on 15 January 2022, the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai volcano erupted without warning, triggering a tsunami which devastated the Kingdom of Tonga. The eruption was hundreds of times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima during World War Two, according to Nasa.

While the loss of life was mercifully small, there was huge damage to Tonga's infrastructure, to its economy and to its public services. Part of the population remains displaced, and many have found their experiences deeply traumatic. Encouraged by the concern of CA members, ExCo therefore agreed to donate £500 to the official Tongan relief fund and to encourage others to make individual contributions wherever possible.

7. Thanks

In conclusion, I want to thank the members of the Executive Committee for their hard work and for the support they have given me personally over the course of the last year. We live in uncertain times, and we would all wish for a stronger and more effective Commonwealth, capable of making its own unique contribution to resolving some of the global challenges we face. Nevertheless, I hope we can draw inspiration from the example of the XXII Commonwealth Games, as the games open in Birmingham on 28 July.

Stuart Mole
Chair
12 July 2022