



# THE COMMONWEALTH ASSOCIATION

*Staying engaged – promoting and fostering the Commonwealth*

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2024

Online through Zoom

Monday 29 July 2024

Starting at 2.30pm

### ***Agenda***

*All timings are approximate*

1. 1430-1435	<b>Welcome and opening remarks</b> – Stuart Mole
2. 1435-1437	<b>Apologies</b> To be sent to the Secretary, David Blake – email <a href="mailto:dsblake2004@yahoo.co.uk">dsblake2004@yahoo.co.uk</a> or by phone on 01494 583112 or 07740856948
3. 1437 – 1442	<b>Minutes of the 2023 Annual General Meeting</b> (circulated with this agenda)
4. 1442 – 1455	<b>Chair's report 2023/24</b> (circulated with this agenda) – Stuart Mole Questions from the floor on Chair's report and 2023 AGM minutes
5. 1455-1505	<b>Treasurer's report</b> (Accounts for the financial year 1 January – 31 December 2023 circulated with this agenda) – Richard Sisson  Questions on the accounts Adoption of the accounts
6. 1505 – 1515	<b>Elections for Officers and Executive Committee and appointment of the auditor</b> Nominations were invited with a closing date of 22 July. Details of nominations received are attached.
7. 1515 – 1530	<b>Any other business</b>



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## **Minutes of the 2023 Annual General Meeting held at Marlborough House and online using Zoom on 19 July 2023**

1. The Chair, Stuart Mole, welcomed members to Marlborough House for the first in-person AGM for several years and a small number who were joining online.

64 people had registered for the meeting and/or the lecture, of whom 46 (two thirds) were members. Other attendees included staff of the Secretariat, particularly the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), others with an interest in the Commonwealth who were not members and some members of the Robertson family.

The quorum of 15 for the AGM was met.

2. **Apologies for absence for the AGM** were received from Magna Aidoo, Chris Bowman, Greg Covington, Hugh Craft, Richard Longhurst, Judy McNeil, Sue Onslow and Martin Smith.

3. **Minutes of the 2022 AGM**

The minutes of the previous year's meeting, which had been circulated in advance, were accepted by the meeting as a correct record. The final minutes included a paragraph from Mark Robinson about CHOGM, which was taken under Any Other Business. Richard Sisson asked for a minor change in his report, which was incorporated.

4. **Chair's report**

Stuart Mole presented his *Chair's report*, which had been circulated to members in advance. It had been a busy year and he ran through the report, emphasising the following issues:

- the planting of a tree in honour of Patsy Robertson in the garden of Marlborough House, including the necessary liaison with Buckingham Palace
- the service to the Commonwealth of many people who unfortunately are no longer with us, including Sir Peter Marshall, who had passed away recently
- the stream of news and stories which are made available either through the website or the Comassoc Google group

- the relationship between the Association and the Independent Forum for Commonwealth Organisations (IFCO), the *Round Table* and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies
- the development of youth initiatives in liaison with CYP, including this year's Patsy Robertson lecture by Cherisse Francis, which were especially important during the Commonwealth Year of Youth
- the need for members with experience of the Commonwealth's youth activities and/or memorabilia to come forward, especially if they had items which could be contributed to the virtual museum
- the Zimbabwe elections and the Commonwealth Games, which would be dealt with in Any Other Business

The meeting agreed to adopt the report.

## 5. Treasurer's report

Richard Sisson presented the *Accounts* for 2022. Income from membership subscriptions had risen from £1,692 in 2020 to £1,885 in 2021 and £2,055 in 2022. Expenditure for the year, at £1,045, was down on the previous year, but this was accounted for by the lack of expenditure on catering in 2022 owing to the heatwave which meant that the AGM was not held in person and lower payments for the website because set-up expenditure had been encountered earlier. The net assets of the Association were £6,547.

Adoption of Richard's report was proposed by Karen Brewer and seconded by Mark Robinson and accepted by the meeting.

## 6. Appointment of auditor

Rickie Sankar was re-appointed as auditor of the Association's accounts.

## 7. Elections

Stuart reported that the Constitution allowed for three elected and three co-opted members. The Committee wished to add two members to the Committee by co-option - Rickie Sankar and Max Gaylard. The meeting agreed to this.

The following nominations for officers and committee members were also accepted by the meeting:

Position	Nominee	Nominated by	Seconded by
Chair	Stuart Mole	Amitav Banerji	Cheryl Dorall

Vice Chair	Bishakha Mukherjee	Richard Bourne	Domini Bingham
Secretary	David Blake	Sharon Robinson	Raja Gomez
Treasurer	Richard Sisson	Mushtaq Zaman	K B K Rao
Membership Secretary	Lorna McLaren	Carmaline Bandara	Bobbie Dohunso-Tetty
Committee Member 1	Shobhna Rattansi	Dharani Rethnam	Judy McNeill
Committee Member 2	Sreetharan Vallipuram	William Rezel	Chumani Monerawela
Committee Member 3	Felix Samuel	Andrea David-Hugh-Kong	Diana Bailey

Stuart confirmed that members of any Steering Committee dealing with a specific subject or anyone who had prepared a report for the Association would be able to attend an Executive Committee meeting when it discussed that subject.

## **8.Any other business**

Mark Robinson, who had been Chair of the Zimbabwe Committee some years ago, spoke to the meeting about the current situation in that country and whether it was likely to be re-admitted as a member of the Commonwealth. A number of those present took part in the discussion.

Stuart raised the issue of the future of the Commonwealth Games following the announcement that the 2026 Games would not be held in the Australian state of Victoria, mainly for financial reasons. This was a distressing situation, but he felt that other arrangements might be possible. Concern was expressed that the Games were a major part of the Commonwealth presence in the world and that its disappearance would have a big impact on the public view of the organisation. One member commented on the Birmingham Games which had included events about the Commonwealth outside the world of sport and had shown how the idea of the Commonwealth could be presented to different audiences. Another said that although Victoria was not receptive to the Games, other parts of Australia might be able to host them. India was another possibility. Both London and Scotland were also raised as possible hosts. It was emphasised by one member that hosting major sports events was becoming very expensive and that one possibility might be to share out the Games among regions of the Commonwealth.

Nicholas Watts from IFCO spoke briefly about a number of matters including:

- a meeting with Joshua Sitipa, a new senior director at the Secretariat
- a report on the collective impact or contribution of Commonwealth organisations, which had attempted to look at their relationship with the Commonwealth Charter
- the launch of the report
- the role of IFCO within the structure of the Commonwealth, given that it is not itself accredited to the Secretariat

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The meeting was followed by the Third Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture, which was given by Barbadian lawyer and activist Cherisse Francis. The lecture is available for viewing at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h\\_hZNJbMgN4&t=1133s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_hZNJbMgN4&t=1133s)



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## **Chair's Report, 2023/2024**

The Annual General Meeting this year has, unusually, been separated out from the Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture. The AGM will be held in July, as has become customary, but by Zoom (which, since the Covid pandemic, has been an essential operating mechanism for the CA). This will allow us to hold the Fourth Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture and Reception in Marlborough House in October, just before the Samoa CHOGM, and give us time to promote the event extensively. I hope it will also mean that some of our members based outside the UK will be able to join us on Zoom for the AGM on Monday 29 July.

### **1. Arrival and departures**

I have mentioned before that, given the status of our Association as an alumni body of former Commonwealth staff, we inevitably lose members and supporters over time. This last year has been no exception and, since I last reported, those we have lost include:

Tunku Abdul Aziz, Noor Farida Ariffin, Vivian Brown, Peter Dunne, John Fowler, Gerald Hensley, Neville Linton, Chris Rogers, Siai Taylor and Pauline Thaha

We salute them all, whatever their role, send our condolences to their families and express our deep appreciation for their years of service to the Commonwealth.

We also extend our condolences to members who have lost spouses and partners during the reporting year.

Happily, thanks in particular to the efforts of our Membership Officer, Lorna McLaren, new members continue to be recruited to the organisation. For various reasons, there are now fewer recruits from our principal source, the Commonwealth Secretariat. However, our focus is increasingly on former staff of other Commonwealth organisations who wish to maintain their links with the Commonwealth and with former colleagues.

### **2. Communication and dialogue**

#### **a) Special events**

The first event of the new operating year was the Third Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture, which was held in Marlborough House and delivered by Cherisse Francis, a dynamic Barbadian legal professional, researcher, educator and youth activist. In her passionate and wide-ranging lecture entitled 'Can the Commonwealth be You(th)?', Cherisse highlighted the significant role young people are playing in realising the core values and principles of the



Commonwealth, including democracy, human rights and gender equality, as set out in the Commonwealth Charter. This much applauded lecture, which also marked the “Commonwealth Year of Youth 2023”, was followed by a lively Q & A session and a drinks reception in the Blenheim Saloon. The Association is indebted to the Commonwealth Youth Programme for partnering with us on this occasion and providing generous financial and logistical support.

In December, we returned to Marlborough House, to celebrate Christmas at our lunchtime reception. Gathering in the East Wing (by Sir Christopher Wren’s historic

kitchens) rather than in the fine rooms, space was limited but there was a full turnout, and a happy time was had by all.



## **b) The website and our YouTube channel**

The Commonwealth Association website is now well established and has proved to be an important communication tool with the CA membership and beyond. As members are aware, the website facilitates access to a wide range of information, which includes how the Commonwealth Association was established and has evolved over time, how to join the CA, as well as documentation for its Annual General Meetings. It also provides information about the CA's events, including key moments captured through videos and photographs. The CA event videos are accessed through the Commonwealth Association YouTube channel and provide, I hope, an added source of interest.

In addition to 'Governance' issues and events, the website is a useful avenue for sharing experiences and memories while working at the Commonwealth Secretariat or in other Commonwealth organisations. Recent additions include Asif Khan crediting the Commonwealth Association for bringing him together with fellow Commonwealth Association members and fondly reminiscing about their time at the Secretariat.

The 'Memories Unlocked' section, where interesting and sometimes funny anecdotes are shared by members, continues to be populated with new contributions. Most recently, Martin Smith has reminisced about his time at the Secretariat and Richard Bourne has

shared his remarkable insights and experiences when he worked at the Commonwealth Secretariat as an adviser/consultant. I hope you enjoy these memories and would urge others to share their stories with Shobhna Rattansi (shobhnasr@gmail.com).

A new addition to the website will go live soon. 'Tributes to Former Colleagues' will bring together information about colleagues and friends of the Commonwealth who have passed away. The section will include the many tributes paid to them through the CA.

David Blake and Shobhna Rattansi spend a great deal of time maintaining and improving the website and deserve our special thanks.

### **c) Comassoc – the Google Group**

One of the most successful routes for communicating directly with our members and supporters is through our Google Group, *Comassoc*. David Blake, our secretary, who curates this activity, is superb at uncovering and publicising information which we might find of interest. This may be news items, press releases, official documents or nuggets unearthed elsewhere. These are sent to all members and supporters and can be discussed by everyone. Sometimes the debate can be vigorous and passionate, such as with our exchanges this year on the crisis in the staging of the Commonwealth Games, on Gaza, Palestine and Israel, on Zimbabwe's recent elections or on the challenges facing present-day South Africa. At other moments, the discussion can be poignant (perhaps in remembering former colleagues who have died), rather abstract (such as the importance of hope) or fascinatingly quirky, such as identifying ex-staff members who have gone on to hold high political office. Long may it flourish!

## **3. Partnerships**

### **a) Working with the Commonwealth Secretariat**

It is hardly surprising that, for many reasons, the CA's most enduring relationship is with the Commonwealth Secretariat. We are an officially accredited Commonwealth organisation and therefore have both obligations to discharge and opportunities to pursue. As mentioned below, we have recently developed close working ties with the Commonwealth Youth Programme, headed by Layne Robinson, as well as being in touch on a less formal basis with officers working on democracy and elections, human rights, climate change and development and other priorities. We are also in frequent contact with a consistently helpful and efficient Conference Unit, with the Partnerships Office and with the Librarian and Archivist, Hilary McEwan. The Association has also been regularly represented at the Secretary-General's periodic consultations with Commonwealth organisations.

The heartbeat of the official Commonwealth remains the biennial CHOGM and, not having been represented at the last summit in Rwanda (in 2022), we are delighted that we will have representation at the Samoa CHOGM in October this year. Of course, given the CA's very limited financial resources, the prospect of making provision for travel and accommodation from London (where most of our ExCo members live) is out of the question. However, I am pleased that our own Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus, recently retired from the Australian diplomatic service, has agreed to represent the

Commonwealth Association and to send us regular reports and photos for our website. Matthew, and his wife Angela, were already intending to play a part in the Peoples Forum in Apia and we are able to make a modest contribution to Matthew's expense as part of our invitation to him to play an enhanced role.

#### **b) Working with IFCO**

Our Vice-Chair, Dr Bishakha Mukherjee, continues to be the CA's capable representative on the Steering Group of the Independent Forum for Commonwealth Organisations (IFCO). Dr Nicholas Watts, the Chair of IFCO, is of course the group's founder and highly effective chair, as well as being a CA member. IFCO is now preparing for the Samoa CHOGM and has made a submission to the Committee of the Whole – scheduled to meet on 3 September - on the critical role being played by Commonwealth Accredited Organisations (AOs). The submission makes specific recommendations for amplifying the voice of Commonwealth civil society and builds on the 2023 report entitled *The collective contribution of Commonwealth Accredited Organisations to advancing the principles and objectives of the Commonwealth Charter*.

#### **c) Working for women's economic empowerment**

Bishakha Mukherjee has also been 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 (CWEA). The project seeks to enable high potential female-led businesses to grow their enterprises internationally, using the Commonwealth trade advantage. It is hoped that the Women's Affairs Ministry in Samoa will secure wider host government support so that Samoa can sponsor a single country pilot project for its women entrepreneurs. If the pilot is successful, the intention is to expand the scope of the CWEA Programme across other countries and regions of the Commonwealth.

#### **d) Working with *The Round Table* and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies**

Two of the Association's regular partners are *The Round Table* (The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs) and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in the University of London. The Association has members involved in both organisations and there is a shared interest in many Commonwealth issues which makes each body natural partners for debating and developing Commonwealth policies, whether through conferences, webinars or articles and blogs.

As an illustration, following publication of my book *The Commonwealth, South Africa and Apartheid: Race, Conflict and Reconciliation* (Routledge, 2023), the Institute of Commonwealth Studies invited me to talk about the book under the title "The Commonwealth and Apartheid: Myth and Reality". I was able to invite a number of CA members to join the debate which has since been publicized on the websites of all three organisations.

### **4. Projects and campaigns**

## a) CA's Youth Initiatives

In 2023, the Executive Committee (ExCo) decided to develop a strand of our activities which promoted and supported young people in the Commonwealth. This, we felt, would demonstrate our belief in young people as key to sustaining the organisation's values into the future. It would also be our contribution to marking the 50th anniversary of the birth of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) and recognising the "Commonwealth Year of Youth", now extended up to the opening of the Samoa CHOGM, in October 2024.

Earlier this year, ExCo (through a working group comprising Lorna McLaren, Felix Samuel and myself) submitted to CYP detailed proposals for a **Commonwealth Association Youth Award**. This would be funded by the CA and presented every three years at the triennial Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting. The award would comprise a cash contribution of £1,000 together with a trophy and a certificate. A provision of £500 would be budgeted annually for this purpose, for a total outlay of £1,500 every 3 years, subject to a review at the end of each triennium. Further details will be available following a formal response from CYP.

The CA is also assisting CYP in their plans to create a **virtual museum** of youth in the Commonwealth by gathering photographs, oral histories and memorabilia. The Association has also facilitated contact with former CYP colleagues or supporters and suggested possible oral history interviews.

As part of the Association's engagement with **CYP@50** and with Commonwealth youth issues more generally, the CA partnered with CYP in inviting the talented Cherisse Francis to deliver the Third Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture in Marlborough House (as described elsewhere). Later in the year, the CA (represented by Felix Samuel) was an accredited observer at the Tenth Commonwealth Youth Ministers' Meeting in London and, at the meeting's conclusion, a number of CA members were invited to the Youth Awards Ceremony in St James's Palace, in the presence of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.

## b) Commonwealth sport

At the 2023 AGM, the meeting debated the shock news that the state of Victoria, Australia, had announced its withdrawal from its longtime commitment to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games. At that point, it looked as though there might be other states and cities in Australia willing to take Victoria's place and, led by some of CA's Australian members, the CA offered to assist the lobbying process. As the focus moved away from Australia and as the Commonwealth Games Federation prepared to meet in Singapore in December 2023 for its General Assembly, I had a meeting with Katie Sadleir (CGF's CEO) and Martin Reynolds (Director of Strategic Development) to explore how Commonwealth organisations like the CA might help the Commonwealth Games in meeting its short- and longer-term challenges. As the survival of the Commonwealth Games became a public issue (mirrored by our own internal debate), it seemed to me that CGF might benefit from a closer relationship with other Commonwealth organisations and that the focus might be on public advocacy to put the positive case for the Games as a counter to the frequent 'imperial relic' trope.

As I write, the expected announcement on a replacement 2026 host is still awaited and the debate about the future of the Games continues. To that end, I am hoping that the Fourth Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture in October can be delivered by a significant Commonwealth sporting figure, speaking to many of these issues, and that the CA will be able to work both with the Sports Desk in the Secretariat and CGF in delivering the event.

### **c) Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth**

At the end of August 2023, Zimbabwe held controversial presidential and parliamentary elections. While the serving President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and his ZANU-PF party were pronounced the victors, the general response from regional and international observers was critical of many aspects of the poll. One such critic was Professor Stephen Chan, a CA member and longtime friend of Zimbabwe and observer of its post-independence development, who was deported by the authorities on the eve of the election.

The Commonwealth Observer Group at Zimbabwe's 2023 elections issued an interim report which was notably less critical than other international observers, with some speculating that the Commonwealth might be preparing for Zimbabwe's readmission to membership at the Samoa CHOGM.

Since the 2023 elections, the CA has explored a joint event on these issues with the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and other possible partners and has highlighted the failure of the Secretariat to release the COG's Final Report.

### **d) Commonwealth staff pensions**

I was approached at the end of last year by a member who, like many of us, receives a pension through the Commonwealth Secretariat Pension and Life Assurance Scheme (1979). To supplement this scheme, the Commonwealth may also award an additional increase on a discretionary basis. A review is carried out annually to compare the total pension benefits to UK Public Sector pension increases and consider whether to award an additional increase to bring them into line. This arrangement is paid as supplementary to the main pension payment. The combination of the guaranteed provisions of the main scheme, supported by the supplementary scheme, has meant that for over twenty years the Secretariat's overall pensions have kept pace with inflation.

However, in 2023, with inflation in the UK rising sharply, the link between UK and Commonwealth public service pensions was broken. UK public service pensions were increased by 10.1% (for 23/24) while no increase was declared for the same period in the Commonwealth supplementary pension.

While many of our members will be adversely affected by changes to the usual practice, the Executive Committee discussed whether it should become involved in an issue which is not of universal concern. Some former Secretariat staff are covered by later pension arrangements or opted to take ex-gratia payments at the end of service. Others who served with other Commonwealth organisations are in different pension schemes altogether.

However, ExCo resolved that it should respond positively to any request from the membership where it seemed reasonable to do so and where the CA might have some influence in addressing the issue. Accordingly, I wrote to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Patricia Scotland, expressing concern at “this apparent break with previous practice in protecting the pensions of former staff” and asked that the previous commitment to these Commonwealth pensioners be restored. At the time of writing, no substantive decision has yet been made.

## **5. Our governance**

The Association is run by its Executive Committee (ExCo), which consists of the officers (Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and Membership Officer), three elected Committee members and up to three co-opted members.

During the year under review, ExCo has met six times: in October and December 2023, and in February, April, June and July 2024. Two of those meetings have been in-person (in London) and the remainder have been held on Zoom.

## **6. Thanks**

I became Chair in 2020, following the unexpected and much-lamented death of our founder, Patsy Robertson. At the 2024 AGM I will have completed nearly four years as Chair, following eighteen years as Vice-Chair, as Patsy’s deputy. I have enjoyed working with the Commonwealth Association, and with ExCo, immensely. In that time, I believe the CA has made a significant contribution to the Commonwealth in a number of key areas and we have also been able to help former colleagues keep in touch, not only to share their memories and wisdom but also to take part in our projects and activities from time to time. ExCo has prepared carefully for the nomination of Max Gaylard as my successor, and he has been an active member of the Committee since his co-option last year. Equally, in wishing Max well (should he be successfully elected) I have agreed to be co-opted to ExCo so that I can continue to provide my active support as we move forward.

I particularly want to thank successive members of ExCo, notably officers past and present, for all that they have done to support me personally and, more generally, to achieve our shared goals. This has been a constant reminder to me that the most rewarding aspect of my experience of the Commonwealth has been in the rich diversity of those who have been friends and colleagues.

**Stuart Mole**

Chair

20 July 2024



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## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

MONDAY 29 JULY 2024

### NOMINATIONS FOR OFFICERS AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2024/2025

POST	NAME	PROPOSED BY	SECONDED BY
Chair	Max Gaylard	Stuart Mole	Amitav Banerji
Vice Chair	Bishakha Mukherjee	Domini Bingham	Carmaline Bandara
Secretary	David Blake	Cheryl Dorall	Richard Bourne
Treasurer	Richard Sisson	Dharani Rethnam	Elizabeth Hinks
Membership Officer	Lorna McLaren	Sharon Robinson	Roy Chalmers
Committee Member 1	Shobhna Rattansi	Raj Gomez	Greg Covington
Committee Member 2	Felix Samuel	Sudesh Thaman	Andrea David-Hugh-Kong
Committee Member 3	Sree Vallipuram	Jennifer Fonseka	William Rezel

No nomination was received for Returning Officer

