The Commonwealth in the Twenty-First Century

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, it is a great honour to speak with you today, and in particular to celebrate with you the 50th anniversary of the Commonwealth Secretariat. My theme is the Commonwealth in the Twenty-First century.

Let us begin by admitting an ugly truth about where we are now: Few people today believe in the Commonwealth.

For some in the global south it is a useless relic of empire, if not the instrument of a latter day neo-colonialism. For others in the global north, within which we must include Australia and New Zealand despite their place on the map, it is the rusty vehicle of a superannuated 1970s Third Worldism, irrelevant to the real drivers of progress in the contemporary world.

For the wider public in Britain and in the former colonies, there is something cobwebbed and mildewed about the Commonwealth, where it is now seen as an excuse for expensive junketing by the politicians of poor nations, and as a comfortable tax-free perch for an elite of technocrats. When I posed the question of the meaning of the Commonwealth to a Caribbean audience, one person quipped that my speech to you today should simply be 'what can be said of the Commonwealth other than that the bar is open ... thank you for coming'.

About 70% of the budget of the Commonwealth Secretariat is funded by Britain, Canada, and Australia, but it is a reflection of the declining investment of these powers in the organisation that in real terms this contribution has been squeezed for a long time. These declining material contributions are mirrored by a declining level of representation and participation at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conferences.

This reflects an important shift which we need to be candid about. Since the end of the Cold War we have seen the quiet reconstitution in international relations of what in practice is the old alliance of Britain and the 'White Dominions' with the United States, the so-called 'anglosphere'. The foreign, security, diplomatic and economic policies of these five powers are tightly integrated today, and they seek to prosecute a common agenda in and through NATO, the European Union, the WTO, and where possible the United Nations and the Commonwealth, and almost always in alliance with their most powerful transnational, financial and corporate entities.

This corporate/ white 'anglosphere' public-private programme of cooperation is the real power in the Twenty-First century world, the rise of China or India notwithstanding, and for it the Commonwealth is only one tool, and one of only limited value. There are no Pierre Trudeaus or Bob Hawkes prominent in the politics of Canada and Australia seeking to take the side of the 'Global South' and who see the Commonwealth as fundamental to national identity and interest. Nor are there British politicians who appear to recognise, as Willi Brandt did in the 1970s, how the best interests of the 'Global North' lie in the expansion of health, welfare and economic and social

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rights in Africa, Asia and Latin America, even sometimes at the expense of the power and profit of corporations. On the other hand, ambitious political and business entities in India or South Africa seek out bilateral deals with the global North, and rarely think in terms of entities like the Commonwealth.

This retreat of a view that the Commonwealth has a central role to play should not surprise us: it is only part of the collapse of the post-1945 Keynesian welfarist programme, within which nation states and international organisations were viewed as key instruments for the engineering of development, welfare, and cosmopolitan progress. The Commonwealth today is an elegant vessel which has been left almost beached by that retreating tide of utopian optimism, its rusting bulk surrounded by meaner small boats pursuing their narrow self-interest.

When people write optimistically about the Commonwealth today, it is almost always in the language of instrumentality, pitching the organisation as a space for small states and larger ones to meet and talk. But so many of the conversations which it might shelter, such as those about climate change, or trade, or democratic governance, already have other more prominent institutional drivers.

Under Sir Shridath Ramphal, the Commonwealth was an important player in international affairs, not just because of his vision and leadership, but because of the historical moment he inhabited which gave him and the Secretariat space to occupy. Today, whatever the gifts of his Excellency Kamalesh Sharma, real business is done elsewhere, and the Secretariat and Heads of Government Conferences become a little like provincial theatres in which the shows of Broadway and the West End receive an airing. Global policy may be prosecuted there, but it is given its form elsewhere. And it will continue to be done so, if the current arrangements of international society are simply taken for granted.

A real living vibrant future for the Commonwealth can only lie in challenging the ground on which global society meets: instrumentality can only take us so far; we need to do the hard work of asking about values and meaning, and even to cultivate an idea of the Commonwealth as a space for a kind of confrontation with things and powers as they are, in which we seek to drive change in the world. The Commonwealth must be ambitious or it is dead. What is, or should be, the meaning of the Commonwealth? What terrain should it occupy? We must wrestle with these questions, beginning with a backward glance.

The idea of the Commonwealth is an ancient one, with its roots in Roman ideas of that set of shared social and human interests which give legitimacy to state power, which stand above the private interests of the rich and the powerful, and which provide a ground for cosmopolitan reconciliation. The idea of the commonweal, of the *res publica*, of the *bien publique*, of the public good remains a well of pure water from we still can drink today. It has been the secret spring underlying all of the forms which the Commonwealth has taken, since its first surfacing as an idea, over a century ago.

When Lord Rosebery in 1884 announced that 'The British Empire is a commonwealth of nations' he was animated by a peculiar mixture of political ideologies – in one direction a language of democracy, in another a language of domination and right. He spoke on behalf of the Imperial Federation Movement, the real *fons et origen* of the Commonwealth idea, which imagined, as Sir John Seeley projected in his lectures on the Expansion of England, that maritime Britain would only be able to hold its own in the Twentieth-century world, against the emerging continental superpowers of the United States and Russia through forging a global state based on a democratic convergence of Britain's global diaspora. It was an ideology of empire for an age of democratic politics.

Of course, for Roseberry and his heirs, certainly into the 1940s, with echoes into our own time, that convergence was based on a racial kith and kin solidarity, it was a British-led alliance of the masters of the world for whom black and brown peoples were intended to be perpetual hewers of wood and drawers of water, perpetual students of advanced nations, and who would not be ready for decades or centuries for the franchise and self-government. There was for them a providential aura surrounding the Commonwealth, for as Rosebery put it in 1900, when we look at the empire, 'Do we not hail in this less the energy and fortune of a race than the supreme direction of the Almighty'? The British Empire, at least for those who looked from within the machine, was an instrument for the propagation of peace, order, religion, freedom, economic efficiency, and ultimately democracy to the world.

It looked rather different, perhaps, from the other direction.

We may look at the Commonwealth then as being founded, from one perspective, on the paradoxical combination of democratic ideology and racism. And yet, there was something alive in that original hypocrisy, in that global consciousness forced upon Britain by its experience of imperial power there was something creative and important. What lies on the face of a mask has an agency independent of what moves behind it. Many who loved the late modern version of the Imperial idea did so because, however fraudulently, it promised a global cosmopolitan brotherhood of man.

The common ground of Imperialism and Anti-imperialism is this idea of a common ground of humanity. For the imperial idea was the opiate of the élite, its projects of 'round tables', of future 'Commonwealths' all spoke to this dream of a distant horizon of equality. 'The British Empire is going to be a democracy', wrote Sydney Low in 1915, although, of course, in the medium term, the enlightened few would have to rule. Athenian democracy, the Roman republic, the Christian empires of the modern era, the dominant powers of the international society of our own time, all appeal to an idea of community which justified and justifies present inequality. It is the work of democrats in every generation to hold elites to their word, and to insist that the idea of international society, of a common ground on which we all meet, be made real. It is through such challenges, over the generations, that we have given democracy a new meaning. And there is much more work to be done.

The second re-foundation of the Commonwealth came about 100 years ago, when during the first world war and the 1920s, the politicians of Australia, Canada, and South Africa insisted exactly in this way that parity of status with Britain should be a reality and not just a fragrant idea. This is the road which led to the Statute of Westminster of 1931 which affirmed the constitutional equality of Britain and the Dominions, and to the doctrine of the multiplicity of the Crowns, under which so many British colonies would achieve independence in the 1960s, through which it was asserted that the King or Queen might separately and distinctly be King or Queen of the United Kingdom, Australia, or Jamaica. We must always remember that Britain did not drive this turn – it came from the white dominions, who insisted on separate diplomatic representation in the United States, and even in the case of Canada to a currency linked to the dollar rather than the pound.

The third, for us perhaps, most important re-foundation came in the late 1940s, in which it was the genius of Nehru to insist that it was possible for the principal of democratic sovereignty to be given its fullest extension in the Commonwealth, for republican government to be its foundation, and for Britain to be a member like any other, no longer to be *primus inter pares.* If the ghost at the heart of the Old Commonwealth which preceded 1945 was the British empire, we might argue that ghost at

the heart of the new Commonwealth, of which Nehru should be seen in a sense to be the father, was the spirit of the Bandung Conference, that great meeting which took place 60 years ago this April, bringing together Nehru, Nasser, Nkrumah, with Sukarno, Ho Chi Minh and Zhou Enlai. The Bandung idea was that the international system could and should be reinvented to serve the best interests of the majority of people in the world. It is this idea, that there was a set of global common interests in which the poorest and weakest would be equally represented, which inspired Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Milton Obote of Uganda, and Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, in the push which led to the foundation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965. And it is to this ideal that Shridath Ramphal provided to be such an exceptional servant.

We must remember that much as in the 1920s, in the 1960s, the reformation of the Commonwealth in service of an expanded democratic commonweal was initially resisted by Britain, joined to some extent by the former insiders of 'the Club'. And yet, in important ways, putting to one side Margaret Thatcher's discomfort with the organisation, British policy makers came to recognise in the 1960s and after that the post-colonial Commonwealth was an entity through and with they could do business, a means of connecting bilateral and multilateral initiatives. And so perhaps it might be in our time. For the programme I shall very briefly outline to you today is one premised on the Commonwealth challenging Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India and South Africa – the big dogs of the organisation – to confront the interests and rights of the smaller, poorer and weaker members of the Commonwealth.

It is to that idea of the commonweal towards which the Commonwealth must return to refresh itself. We need to dare to believe that another and better way of living both in this society, and around the world is possible. I recognise that the paradox of our neophiliac age is that we are profoundly anti-utopian. Such a contradiction, this age in which we celebrate technology, and believe that anything is possible for machines, but we no longer think it is possible for human beings to reorganise their societies in any way other than its present order. We think all that is left for us is to manage the spaces left behind by history or by the power of private interests. This must be challenged, we must start to believe again that human beings can think and work towards a commonweal, a *res publica*, a *bien publique*, which is larger and more important than any nation state or corporate entity, and which should, and does have the power to remake the world. We need to ask the big questions about how we live now, and how might we live in fifty or one hundred year's time?

Might the Commonwealth lead an international conversation on the more controversial questions of our age? We might examine the extraordinary growth of economic inequality both within and across nations in the midst of prodigious economic growth. We might also look at the retreat of real democratic popular control of governments, here and around the world, in the midst of expensive elections and entrenched political parties, the gap between the delivery of a four- or five-year cycle of elections, the theatre of Westminster democracy, and the perception of citizens that they are not fully included in the decisions or effects of governments. Or the tension between economic underdevelopment and environmental conservation, we cannot talk about climate change without talking about poverty. We might look at the contradiction between free trade being the instrument for some kinds of economic growth, and on the other hand that forms of protection, in particular of infant industries, have been the essential basis of every historical case of industrialisation. The United States, we must remember, from the 1790s until the early Twentieth century had a tariff on industrial imports of close to 40%, that was the umbrella under which its industrialisation took place. They were only imitating the tariff policies which the British had used to protect their industries from Dutch in the previous centuries, and the Germans and later the Japanese would follow a similar path.

At the same time we might want to ask about the right of some nations to make wars unilaterally, while sealing their frontiers to refugees who are victims of these wars. We might ask about the problem of governments retreating from the delivery of public services in poorer countries, under the encouragement of the IMF, at the same time as there are no private actors entering the space which they occupied to provide high quality education, health care, and transport at an affordable price. In many cases it is only governments that have an interest in making the well-being of the poorest, who are always the global majority, a priority.

Many of the policy solutions which were experimented with in the period from about 1980 to the present – so-called 'economic liberalisation', privatisation, the retreat of government – need to be rethought in the 21st century. For their fruit has been forms of the visible collapse of many forms of human development, in the midst of quite indifferent results for economic growth, in many parts of the world. I recommend for your attention the study 'The Emperor has no Growth', which compares the rates of economic growth around the world from 1960-1980, the heyday of Keynesian developmentalist and welfarist social policy, in which states were central actors, with the pattern of economic growth since 1980, when the neo-liberal experiment began, the period in which we are supposed to have seen this miracle of 'liberalisation'. What becomes apparent is that only those countries which broke the rule of the neo-liberal game, in particular China, arguably in some ways India, have we seen economic growth better than that of the first twenty years of the post-colonial moment.

Can the Commonwealth be a vehicle through which the international system takes stock of itself in a way it cannot within the United Nations? Might the nations of the global north and south begin through its councils to engage in a set of dialogues which genuinely open up the possibility of new directions?

One of the key problems of our post-1990 period is the ways in which the global north has been able to set the rules of the international system. We might ask, for example, how the IMF and the WTO be reinvented, how might the interests of the private and public sectors of the world be rebalanced, in the larger interest of the public?

There will I imagine be for many of you a familiar sound to this, for what I am proposing is nothing less than the Commonwealth leading a reopening of the kinds of questions being asked by Willi Brandt and the protagonists of the idea of the New International Economic Order in the 1970.

It will be argued that Britain, Australia and Canada would be allergic to such an initiative. Of course they would be, we should expect that, and yet I am confident that they would stick around, and would want to remain to be part of the discussion, if it was conducted in a respectful and open manner. For it is also true that the question of inequality, and the erosion of democracy is one which exercises the citizens of the global North as well as the global South. In many rather curious ways, the forms of offshore wealth extraction which once characterised the location of the colonies to the mother country, now describes the experience of the British and Australian and Canadian people, relative to the twenty-first century forms of offshored capitalism: companies which make profits onshore, but pay no taxes offshore. There is plenty of ground to find a new terrain of commonweal, if we dare.

In this, the last may be the first, and those nations which emerged most recently from an experience of non-consensual government may yet lead a new moment of democratisation in the history of the world.

I conclude with the poet Aime Cesaire,

'for it is not true that the work of being human is complete
that it is left for us to sit at the feet of the world
that work of being human is only just beginning
and it remains for us to conquer all the interdictions which remain lodged in the recesses of our passions
and no race has the monopoly of beauty, intelligence or force, and there is room for all, at the rendezvous of victory.

Except, I might add, the victory, is never complete. Each generation has the task of renewing and extending the temple of human rights towards an idea of commonwealth.