



## **Note for CPSU special planning event: 18 November, 2004**

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### 1 Purpose of the day

The purpose of the day is to review what are or should be the policy issues affecting the Commonwealth over a timescale lasting to 2010. These should influence the stance of this unique independent think-tank focused on the contemporary Commonwealth -- the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit ( CPSU ).

At the same time the day will consider sustainability models for think-tanks generally, and how to consolidate the CPSU and its work for the future. The CPSU cannot undertake studies without resources to match, and hitherto there has been a tight relation between funding and output ( ie the unit has had little latitude to develop work which may have significance for the Commonwealth, but where there is no obvious funding base ).

Authorised by the Council of London University's Institute of Commonwealth Studies in December 1998<sup>1</sup>, after a feasibility report funded by the UK and Canadian governments earlier that year, the CPSU now has a significant track record and bank of experience. The day will offer an opportunity to share and reflect on this record.

Three members of the CPSU's Advisory Board, likely to be involved in selection of a second Head for the unit next year, will be active participants in the event. Ideas exchanged on 18 November at Canada House will be important, therefore, in guiding them and their colleagues with regard to a sustainable strategy which matches foreseeable policy concerns, and the characteristics of an executive who can carry it through.

### 2 Policy issues for the Commonwealth

Until the CPSU came into existence, few observers saw the Commonwealth as having "policies". There were good reasons for this. Unlike a national government the Commonwealth has no capital, and plainly the Commonwealth Secretariat in London is not

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<sup>1</sup> The CPSU has its own Commonwealth-wide Advisory Board, is responsible for raising its own finance, and relations with the Institute of Commonwealth Studies are governed by a Memorandum of Understanding of July 2003; features of the MoU include a role for the ICS in longer-term appointments at the CPSU and the transfer of funds, normally 15% of earnings, to the ICS in return for financial, rental and other services.

intended to be a source of policies comparable to the European Commission ( or indeed the European Council of Ministers ). Commonwealth Heads of Government, having the ultimate authority, only meet once every two years. How can there be detailed "policies" when not only are there such huge economic and cultural differences among the 53 member states but many, particularly in international matters, have prior commitments ( eg South Africa in SADC or the AU, Caribbean states in CARICOM, the UK to its US ally and/or the European Union )? Furthermore, some governments and their Ministers still see Commonwealth meetings as fora for consultation rather than places where substantive action may be agreed: this is why critics pour water on "Action Plans" agreed by particular groups of Ministers ( eg Women's Affairs or Education Ministers ), and their results can seem disappointing. Finally, when the sense of the Commonwealth is not strong, governments and opinion formers see its activity as just one strand in a wider web of international and regional change, or one stop along the road. Its unique characteristics, and the strength of its voluntarism and diversity, have not been widely understood, or seen as resources for policy.

However, more reflection suggests that the Commonwealth has been and is important for policy. This is not just because, to quote the first Secretary-General, "consultation is the lifeblood of the Commonwealth"; its decried talkshops are actually the best peaceful, non-coercive way to help member states and often the world to reach consensus. There are big examples, such as the anti-apartheid campaign of the 1980s, and the debt write-off and pro-democratisation campaigns of the 1990s. There are also small but valuable contributions to global progress, such as the role that Commonwealth ( and especially Caribbean ) states played in the signing and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ( around 1990-91 ) and the similar role being played in 2003-4 ( significantly by some Commonwealth tobacco producers in Africa ) in the signing and ratification of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. High quality intergovernmental expert groups have sometimes changed the direction of international discourse.<sup>2</sup> As a generalisation the Commonwealth has been most effective, for itself and the wider world, when three components have been moving broadly in the same direction - its governments, its NGOs, and its media.

The CPSU, within the limitations of a project funding approach and a staff which has never risen above six in number, has sought to work to certain principles. Its feasibility study of 1998 recommended two broad priorities - the impact of globalisation on Commonwealth states and societies; and a "Harare programme" deriving from the Commonwealth Harare Declaration, 1991 concerned with democratisation, the strengthening of civil society and human rights. A consultation in late 2001 recommended work in the area of diversity, multiculturalism and communal conflict, which has led CPSU to be involved in a sequence of conferences on such issues ( with the Commonwealth Foundation and the Australian Multicultural Foundation - the next is in Kolkata in March 2005 ). There have been a few eclectic additions ( see our website - [www.cpsu.org.uk](http://www.cpsu.org.uk) ), and the CPSU has now published 15 policy briefs prior to the larger Ministerial meetings.

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that, in future years, the Manmohan Singh expert group, "Making democracy work for pro-poor development" ( 2003 ) will be seen in this light. It is much rarer for a Commonwealth non-governmental exercise to have a similar influence, though a case can be made for "Put our world to rights", the 1991 report of a group chaired by Flora MacDonald ( Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative ).

Where possible the CPSU has cooperated with partners around the Commonwealth ( ranging from the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute to the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs ), in projects which have taken from three months to three years. Its studies in fields such as election observing, Indigenous rights and civil society have been influential, as participants on 18 November will learn. The CPSU has tried to look at topics which affect significant numbers of states and communities, and a cross-section. By focusing studies in India, of course, it would be serving a state inhabited by the majority of Commonwealth citizens; by focusing only on small states, it would be responding to problems facing a majority of states. The CPSU has avoided both these positions. However it can be exposed to what one member of its Advisory Board has described as a "Kew Gardens effect" - that is to say, almost any issue can be researched in a cross-section of Commonwealth countries, but does that mean that the Commonwealth and its components can or will do anything about it?

Because the idea of policy studies for the Commonwealth is new, and so far the CPSU is the only centre dedicated to exploring it, the Unit has had a lot to learn. It has recognised that effective policy work, given the nature of the association, must often be long-term. Further, it is not enough to produce a policy paper - it is necessary to work out who or what institution might be able to act on it. Along the way the CPSU may find itself more deeply implicated in implementation than a policy unit might anticipate. To take a current case, the CPSU has a contract with the DfES to research models for extra-curricular Commonwealth clubs in English secondary schools - following the Nigerian example - which also requires it to stimulate 100 clubs into existence by the end of two years.

A few years ago a staffer at the Commonwealth Foundation quoted the saying, "The Commonwealth is what the Commonwealth does." What she meant is that the Commonwealth has to be defined by its capacity as much as by its rhetoric, and statements by Commonwealth leaders since Coolidge ( 2002 ) have made clear that this capacity should include the totality of the Commonwealth resource - governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental. But the point can be seen in another way. There are, for example, no human rights which are specific to the Commonwealth. However there are particular opportunities and instrumentalities in the Commonwealth - such as the common law, CMAG, the non-governmental CHRI - which support the realisation of human rights.

In reviewing the scope of policy analysis for the Commonwealth up to, say, 2010, these might be a few of the questions:

- Will international economic change - eg the rise of China and India - change the balance of power within the Commonwealth and the nature of its concerns?
- Is the "war on terror" a temporary phenomenon, or will it have a more lasting and negative impact on long-run Commonwealth strategies for democratisation and development?
- Are environmental concerns, especially those affecting small island and poorer developing states, likely to be of such salience that the Commonwealth will have to devote more attention to them?

- Is the Commonwealth's 40 year focus on the political and economic problems of Africa, likely to peak in 2005, a high watermark from which interest may be receding by the end of the decade?
- Is the Commonwealth's significance to its members going to grow or diminish, given other global movements, and how much will this depend on what the Commonwealth itself does and/or the attention of the media?
- More specifically, what Commonwealth activities are likely to be of high importance to its larger members - eg India, Pakistan, South Africa, Nigeria, Australia, Canada and the UK - and if such purposes are not found, what will be the status of a body perceived as a small states' club?
- Are there policy areas for the Commonwealth which build on the goodwill attached to its brand, and avoid the accusation that it is a marginal "me-too" player on the world stage?
- Is there a particular contribution from civil society or the business world which will give the Commonwealth an edge in key policy areas?
- Where may new investment in the Commonwealth and its doings, not necessarily of a financial kind, be looked for?

### 3 The sustainability of think-tanks

The think-tank world has expanded markedly since the 1960s in many countries<sup>3</sup>. On 18 November the CPSU and its friends will have the benefit of inputs from several think-tanks, including one of the oldest in the UK, the Fabian Society. Defining a policy centre can be difficult, since many bodies - academic, NGO and business - publish policy papers and seek to influence public debate and the legislation and approach of governments. Nonetheless a think-tank can usually be described as a substantially independent corporate body, devoted solely to studies of matters of public policy.

The issue of sustainability may be looked at from varied viewpoints: as a matter of economics and financial support; as a matter of public or governmental interest in the topics with which a think-tank is concerned ( which also relates to fashion and publicity ); as a matter of the quality of output ( which also relates to the ability to recruit suitable researchers ); as a matter of competition ( for not all think-tanks survive for long, and in some cases competition can force changes of direction or style, or even drive a think-tank out of existence ).

This note will sketch a few of these issues. For example, in financial terms a think-tank may depend on grants ( corporate, philanthropic, governmental ). It may, like the Fabians, depend on membership subscriptions. It may depend on the selling of consultancy, publications or other services. It may depend, particularly to begin with, on donations from individuals or

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<sup>3</sup> In the mid-1970s, as Assistant Editor of NEW SOCIETY, a weekly then devoted to social science and the social services, I wrote an article describing the growth of London think-tanks. In the late 1970s and early 1990s I supported unsuccessful attempts to establish, first, a think-tank in Amazonia, and secondly, a think-tank in the Caribbean.

corporations which sympathise with its purposes<sup>4</sup>. Typically a think-tank will depend on a mix of inputs.

However there is also a demand side. Think-tanks, and the variety of ideas they may espouse, will flourish where there is an active market for them. Governments and other institutions may want to do something, but don't know what to do; they may want to see how a particular constituency reacts to a trial balloon; they may want to outsource to other researchers what might seem embarrassing or predetermined if it came directly from them. Essentially there has to be an interest in ideas, and policies, and a willingness to try new approaches among potential users. The growth in the number and range of think-tanks over the last 50 years reflects the complexity of problems with which governments and other institutions have to cope, and democratic and business pressures on them to respond.

In going about their work, and achieving sustainability, the visibility of think-tanks to end-users is vital. But this does not necessarily require heavy attention by public media. Some think-tanks are influential, and well-regarded by their audiences, through a low-profile, insiderish strategy. Whereas some employ "young Turks" and impossibilists, thinking the radically unthinkable in order to shake up a particular field, others rely on well-connected, well-known names whose experience is respected by the end-user, and whose recommendations can more readily be adopted.

Many London think-tanks flit lightly from topic to topic – a strategy which means that their reputation may rest overmuch on the quality and impact of their latest report. This may also link with arrangements for staffing, where relatively young researchers pass through rapidly. In other places think-tanks suffer from rapid poaching of their best staff. At a recent discussion with two CPSU Advisory Board members, responsible for the Centre for Democracy and Development ( main office Lagos ) and for the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative ( main office New Delhi ), both saw this as a perennial problem.

A key issue is the persistence of a think-tank's approach, whether in terms of its philosophy or the sphere with which it is concerned. In only a minority of cases will a particular policy prescription be rapidly adopted, even when directed to a single government or nation. The whole philosophy of Fabianism, when the Society was active at the start of the twentieth century, was to demonstrate the desirability of socialism by slow but steady persuasion. Interestingly the same technique was adopted for an opposite purpose by the Institute of Economic Affairs, which proselytised for free markets in the UK in the early 1970s. Young university economists were paid small sums of money to write about market-based solutions to problems in the supply of water, electricity, schools and other services. At the time the IEA papers were thought to be zany. But as Margaret Thatcher's government gained confidence after 1979 more of these prescriptions came to be applied.

So what about the CPSU? The first thing to say about its current project-funded model is that it is not economically sustainable, and that even if it were sustainable it would still suffer from one defect: exclusively project funding may seem to give the funder too large a role in the conceptualisation, if not the findings, of any study. The CPSU's model itself now relies on

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<sup>4</sup> The Institute for Public Policy Research, London, was launched with the aid of three or four wealthy persons who promised donations in its early years.

grant funding. The 1998 feasibility study was paid for by a cash grant from the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office and matching in-kind personnel support from the Canadian Government under a scheme for the overseas deployment of young graduates.

Since 1998 a variety of projects have been paid for, chiefly by a small group of funders ( the European Commission, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Department for International Development and Ford Foundation ). However there has been no core funding, with the exception of a London University/ICS grant of £12,500 a year from 2003, paid following the Kenny Report into the future of the ICS, which concluded that the CPSU was blazing a trail for the ICS as a whole. This small but invaluable London University/ICS grant has been mostly used to pay for inception work for new projects which are not yet funded. In 2003 and 2004 the CPSU has had and will have valuable short-term personnel assistance from Commonwealth Professional Fellows, under a novel scheme of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission.

There are two main drawbacks to an operation which is largely project-funded, and where it is not always possible to claw back a management fee going beyond the 15% payment to the ICS. The first is that the Head himself also depends entirely on project funding, required to undertake specified studies, while also needing to recruit and guide colleagues, and promote new projects. Along the way, as with many NGOs which are semi-voluntary and other think-tanks in their early phases, this means that the Head is not always being paid.

The second drawback is that it is difficult to bridge the sometimes lengthy period between recognition of an important policy area, and the arrival of money that will start a project. In essence the model has been: first, the identification of an issue in broad terms; second, the approach to funders, normally requiring a detailed application for which some prior research is necessary; third, the recruitment of a suitable researcher. In three CPSU cases the preferred researcher has had to take other work before the money came through; in another, two months of a two year contract with a UK government department were lost until a researcher could be found, because it was not feasible to recruit before the contract was signed. In real terms there is frequently a two year gap between the first identification of an area of interest and the start of a project.

Hitherto the CPSU has not been very successful in raising funds from non-UK sources, especially other Commonwealth government sources, though overtures have been made to the Australian, Canadian and Malaysian governments for projects in which it was thought they were interested.<sup>5</sup> There has been one cooperative project with the Commonwealth Secretariat ( on the extension and regulation of e-commerce ) and the CPSU looks forward to more. Applications to the Commonwealth Foundation for support of the Unit's influential work on civil society – funded in stages from 2002-4 by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office – were all unsuccessful.

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<sup>5</sup> The Australian government was approached to support the Unit's civil society study, in the context of Coolum commitments; the Canadian government was approached, inter alia, to back work on the role of the Commonwealth in the support and reform of the UN; the Malaysian government was approached with regard to education.

Experience suggests that the Commonwealth itself is not yet widely enough seen as a significant policy arena to make applying for grants easy, even though much of the Unit's own output has been applauded. Future approaches to economic viability could well include specific allocations in grants for the coordinating work of the Unit's Head, as well as the prospect, still relatively unexplored, of substantial donations from philanthropists or others with affection for the Commonwealth. The success of the ICS appeal for the Emeka Anyaoku Chair in Commonwealth Studies, and the Royal Commonwealth Society's appeal which raised over £3M a decade earlier, are both encouraging.

In non-financial matters the CPSU is well-placed for viability. The Commonwealth is a particular commodity. The CPSU is the only independent think-tank looking at issues which pertain to it. The response of the community of governments and NGOs concerned with the Commonwealth has, overall, been favourable. The Unit, within its constraints, is seeking to take a long view while adapting to changing circumstances. For instance it is hoping, in conjunction with the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, to start a second three-year project concerning Indigenous peoples – this time looking at land rights, resource management, and the care of fragile habitats in twelve member states. It hopes to build on its study of election observing, and inception work on e-democracy, with a full-blown project next year. It has plenty of ideas in the pipeline<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4 What has the CPSU learnt?

Participants on 18 November will have a chance to air their own views about the lessons from the Unit's own projects, and how these can point to ways forward. But they might include:

- The need for careful research, over whatever timescale, and the need to obtain the confidence of key Commonwealth players; any new series of publications designed to be controversial, for which there is probably a case, should be marketed separately
- The need to recognise the range and internationalism of the Commonwealth, and that this cannot be reflected adequately from London WC1 without practical cooperation
- The need to appreciate the close connection between study, policy change, and implementation
- The need to retain an independent approach, even though most studies have only a single funder
- The need to work out where and how substantive policy change may occur in the Commonwealth, and over what timescale for any particular field
- The need to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the Commonwealth in a globalised world, and to build on and advertise the strengths
- The need to budget, and to manage budgets, skilfully
- The need to consider where and how the CPSU has been influential in the past
- The need for persistence

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<sup>6</sup> The Unit is currently working on: local democracy; Commonwealth Clubs in secondary schools; an accessible guide to the UK constitution It is at an inception stage with regard to: cooperation between the Commonwealth and the UN for development goals; cooperation between the Commonwealth and European Union in support of the NEPAD process; Indigenous land rights as above; water policy; and comparative studies of the Francophonie and Commonwealth.

5 How can we build the sustainability of a think-tank focused on the 21<sup>st</sup> century Commonwealth?

Here again it is possible only to throw out a few questions:

- Ought we to worry about the sustainability of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Commonwealth first, and then the sustainability of a think-tank attending to it?
- What would give the Commonwealth more panache, a higher profile, and a more clear-cut role in policy for its own citizens and in the world?
- Should there be a section of CPSU output deliberately fomenting controversy about what many perceive as a sleepy, obscure association?
- Should the CPSU deliberately foster competition to itself – for instance by encouraging the Commonwealth Foundation or Secretariat to provide seed money for Commonwealth-oriented think-tanks in Jamaica, or India or Kenya?
- Should the CPSU structure a different economic model for itself, perhaps with the equivalent of shareholders?
- Should the CPSU find funding for particular posts – eg in public relations, conference organisation, or for cooperation with institutions around the Commonwealth?
- Does the CPSU need a business/strategic plan, comparable to the new arrangements at the Commonwealth Secretariat?
- Does the CPSU's relationship with the ICS need an overhaul, and would this become inevitable if the Unit became better-funded, better-staffed and better-known?

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