



Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings: note prior to the Executive Committee meeting of the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth Secretariat, March 2004

1 The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU), an independent think-tank focused on the contemporary Commonwealth, was founded at the end of 1998 following a feasibility study. It has worked principally on issues of globalisation, and the fruits of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, 1991. Output is published on a website, www.cpsu.org.uk Although sited at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, with which it has a Memorandum of Understanding, the CPSU has its own Commonwealth-wide Advisory Board and raises its own finance. Each project is separately funded.

2 As a matter of strategy, and as a pro bono contribution for which it has no earmarked funding, the CPSU has been publishing Policy Briefs prior to sectoral meetings of Commonwealth Ministers since 1999. In that year it produced the first brief, prior to a Commonwealth Finance Ministers' Meeting. These briefs are designed as short aides-memoires for governments, NGOs and selected media. They have been written by academics, journalists and other specialists. By the end of 2004 the sequence will have covered 15 meetings. CPSU commentaries on ministerial agendas have been provided for full scale meetings of Finance Ministers, Law Ministers, Education Ministers, Women's Affairs Ministers, Health Ministers, Youth Ministers and, in 2004, Tourism Ministers.

3 The CPSU notes that the Executive Committee is expected to review the frequency of sectoral Ministerial meetings at its March 2004 meeting, aiming to bring them into the two- and four-year planning cycle of the Commonwealth Secretariat, and perhaps to align them with UN or international gatherings. At present all Ministerial meetings occur at three yearly intervals, with the exception of annual get-togethers for Finance Ministers (three days), Health Ministers (less than a day) and the Foreign Ministers' meeting inaugurated in 2003 (half a day). The CPSU believes that Ministerial meetings play a significant role in the contemporary Commonwealth, and there is a danger that the current review of their frequency may not do justice to their value. Far more is involved than would be allowed for in calculations of cost alone, or bureaucratic rationalism.

Value of Ministerial meetings for Ministers and their officials

4 It is clear that, broadly speaking, Ministers and their officials place a high value on the opportunity to consult with their peers. Probably the most effective meeting over time has been that of Finance Ministers, annually attended by nearly all relevant Ministers, which has developed consensus on debt write-off, pro-poor development, and other matters; this consensus has guided action within Commonwealth countries, lobbying of the IMF and the World Bank, and the direction of international debates. Law Ministers, working with the assumptions of the common law, have recently promoted access to information, and principles adopted by Heads in Abuja which clarify the relations between executive, legislature and judiciary (the Latimer House principles); they have adopted schemes on extradition, mutual assistance in criminal matters, and encouraged the adoption of anti-terror legislation which respects human rights.

5 However not all Ministerial meetings are of equal value, and meetings of the same type are not always valued in the same way. The CPSU has not had time to carry out an analysis of levels of representation at meetings of different types, but this would give some indication of benefits expected by Ministers themselves. Sometimes, delegations are headed by officials or High Commissioners, not Ministers. Political priorities change. It is interesting to note that the United Kingdom did not field a Minister at either the 1991 or 1994 Education meetings, that the Australian Minister who attended the 2003 Education meeting was the first to do so for many years, and that a former Minister who happened to be in Cyprus in 1993 was able to represent Australia at the Women's Affairs Ministers' Meeting at short notice. Smaller and poorer states can have difficulty in being represented at meetings remote from their countries.

6 Perhaps the most significant vote of confidence in Ministerial meetings as a mode of political exchange and Commonwealth professional cooperation is the fact that, since 2000, four new meetings have taken place: for Foreign Ministers (in the margin of the UN General Assembly), for Sport (in the margin of the Commonwealth and Olympic Games), for Trade (in the margin of the WTO talks), and for Tourism Ministers (as a self-standing gathering). It may be noted too that, although Commonwealth officials have been promoting the idea of meetings at two yearly or four yearly intervals, Education Ministers in Edinburgh in late 2003 decided to maintain the principle of a three yearly interval when accepting an invitation to meet again in Malaysia in 2006.

Significance of major Ministerial meetings in Commonwealth locations for the Commonwealth

7 The High Level Review Group, in its report to the Coolom CHOGM, proposed that where possible Ministerial meetings "should be convened in the margins of other major international meetings" (45.15). However this will mean that such meetings will often take place in non-Commonwealth locations, and will be of a brevity that does not permit substantial exchange on matters of special significance to Commonwealth governments; rather, agendas will become biased by the agenda of the upcoming UN or international meeting. Typically a three day meeting of the traditional type will be reduced to a one day or half day gathering on the eve of the international conference. Commonwealth Health Ministers, due to meet this year on Sunday 15 May prior to the World Health Assembly (WHA), would on previous form have held a three day meeting of their own in a Commonwealth location this year, as well as a short gathering prior to the WHA. However, following the High Level Review, it is understood that this longer meeting will not take place this year or in future.

8 It is obvious that this reduction in time, and in the attention to issues which may be specific to the Commonwealth, represents loss to the specialist delegations which have in the past benefited from full-scale meetings. Equally seriously, this is a loss to awareness of the Commonwealth. Heads of Government have consistently referred to the need to increase awareness of the association, particularly among younger generations and opinion-formers. While the publicity generated by Ministerial meetings has not always been as much as it could have been, the world-wide distribution of "traditional" meetings has been a way of carrying the Commonwealth message to many countries which do not have the resources to host a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). In fact the ballooning nature of the CHOGM and its associated meetings has reduced the number of countries which are potential hosts: the Caribbean has not hosted a CHOGM since 1985. However Commonwealth Law Ministers met in St Vincent in 2002, for example, a nation which could not easily host a CHOGM. Collectively, the existence of specialist Ministerial meetings has brought the Commonwealth alive to many thousands of politicians, officials, NGOs and journalists who would otherwise not have been required to think of it. It has greatly extended the reach of the Commonwealth within governments, and meant that Heads, Foreign Ministers and High Commissioners in Commonwealth capitals are up to date with Commonwealth plans and considerations in many fields of activity.

9 The significance of these meetings has grown over the last few years as they themselves have evolved to include greater non-governmental and private sector involvement. Education Ministers, since their 1997 meeting in Botswana, have benefited from parallel symposia for professionals, and exhibitions and showcases from the private and public sector. For two years' running the Finance Ministers have benefited from civil society inputs, assisted on a Commonwealth regional basis by the Commonwealth Foundation. NGOs have been able, with the press, to sit in on Education Ministers' meetings in Halifax, Canada and

Edinburgh, Scotland. In important ways the Ministerial meetings have been pioneering that closer cooperation with other partners which Commonwealth leaders recommended at Coolum in 2002. Shortened events would reduce this aspect. A recent positive example is the Human Settlements Group, which has brought together Ministers and NGOs concerned with human settlement issues.

The authority of Ministerial meetings

10 Behind some of the pressures to reduce the frequency and length of Ministerial meetings there may lie an issue about the accountability of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the relatively small intergovernmental office set up in 1965 to serve member governments. Following the Coolum CHOGM there has been a drive to simplify governance structures for the Secretariat (and the Commonwealth more generally), and to ensure that the Secretariat focuses on mandates issued by Heads at their biennial meetings. This process, backed by nil real growth in the Secretariat budget, has led officials to draw up a two year and four year planning cycle. Some activities undertaken by the Secretariat, notably the Commonwealth Science Council, are being concluded. Past practices, of willing programmes without willing the means to launch or sustain them, are now recognised to have led to a disparity between rhetoric and action at the intergovernmental level; scattered regional workshops were too often ineffective gestures, without impact or follow-up.

11 The fear has been that Ministerial meetings could set up an alternative source of authority for sections of the Secretariat, which might challenge the priorities laid down by Heads, the governing body and senior management. Embedded here are also some cultural differences, given that sections of the Secretariat are run by professionals rather than diplomats, while Foreign Service and diplomatic personnel operate at the apex of the Secretariat and in its governance. However the record of Ministerial meetings overall does not suggest that they promote a rivalry or confusion within the Secretariat. Rather, they remind those responsible for managing the Commonwealth Secretariat of sectoral priorities, and the real situation within Commonwealth countries and regions. By bringing qualified people together from the majority of countries they provide a reality test. At Edinburgh in 2003, for example, Education Ministers supported the priorities devised, after consultation, by the Secretariat (the Education Action Plan); importantly, the position of the Education Ministers persuaded Heads in Abuja to "affirm that education, whether formal or informal, is central to development in any society and is of the highest priority to the Commonwealth " (paragraph 16, Aso Rock Declaration). Extraordinarily, the high level Commonwealth reviews in 1989-91 and 1999-2002 had completely overlooked education.

12 It is true that Ministers, and the publics they serve, need to feel that their meetings will have concrete results which go beyond a communique. But experience suggests that, so long as there has been adequate consultation in advance, Ministers are unlikely to land the Secretariat with unwelcome mandates. In some cases, such as the controversy over the mobility of school teachers which led to an intergovernmental meeting in Lesotho in February 2003, and the setting up of a Ministerial group, it was necessary for the Secretariat to respond to a problem of which it was already well aware, and on which it had done preparatory work. In other cases it is possible to imagine that Ministerial requests may be serviced in future by bodies other than the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Expense

13 The CPSU has been unable to establish the real cost of Ministerial meetings, though estimates have sometimes been included in Policy Briefs¹. The costs are of different kinds: to the host country (which may only provide accommodation for delegation leaders, staff time, a venue and various types of hospitality); to the sending countries (air fares, accommodations for bigger delegations, staff time); to the Commonwealth Secretariat (air fares, accommodation costs, staff time); and to other players (sponsors, interested private sector and NGOs, media). However, for all parties there are clearly benefits in such terms as the pursuit of national policy, expenditure by visitors, public relations for sponsor companies. Ever since the mid-1980s, for instance, the government of Malaysia has successfully used a strategy of inviting Commonwealth meetings to boost prestige, tourism and intra-Commonwealth trade and investment. The willingness of many governments to host Ministerial meetings of different kinds suggests that, for them, the expense is affordable.

¹ The 1999 Commonwealth Law Ministers' Policy Brief estimated a cost to the host government, then Trinidad & Tobago, of £100,000-£150,000.

14 However there is no doubt that, in an era of greater transparency, the public has a right to know the cost of Commonwealth and other international meetings. Around the Abuja CHOGM, in December 2003, there was a hot and somewhat ill-informed debate in the Nigerian media about the cost of hosting CHOGM. Quite often significant costs, such as the fleet of BMW cars in Abuja bought originally by a sponsor of the African Games, are borne by the private sector. It would be good practice if the costs to a government of a Ministerial meeting, and of a CHOGM, were always reported to parliament after all the expenditures are accounted. There should be no secrets here.

Frequency and continuity

15 Given that most Ministerial meetings take place at three yearly intervals, the proposal to switch them to a biennial or four yearly frequency will face governments with an awkward choice. There is little doubt that a move to a four yearly frequency will damage any sense of continuity in approach from one meeting to the next, and the capacity for cooperation between delegations. The combination of the processes of democracy among Ministers, and normal promotions and retirements among civil servants, will mean that most delegations will attend four yearly meetings working from briefs, and without practical familiarity with Commonwealth issues, personnel and practices. There is already some evidence that, at three yearly intervals, Ministerial meetings can lose the plot when issues are moving rapidly.

16 At the same time a move to biennial meetings may both stretch too far the willingness of governments to host them, and place a greater burden on Commonwealth cooperation -- and the ability of the Commonwealth Secretariat to service it -- than is possible. Perhaps the two most obvious candidates for a move to a biennial fixture are the meetings of Law Ministers and of Education Ministers. Because of the significance of the common law for the Commonwealth, and the volume of legal activity, there is a strong case for making the Law Ministers' meeting biennial. Indeed, for rather similar reasons, the Commonwealth Lawyers' Association is contemplating making the Commonwealth Law Conference a biennial event. As for Education Ministers, given the priority attached to their work by Heads of Government at Abuja, there is a clear case for more frequent meetings; the UNESCO General Assembly, with its involvement of Science and Information as well as Education Ministers, can never offer a substitute venue for Commonwealth Education Ministers.

17 Before altering the frequency with which Ministerial meetings take place, as a result of a decision in London which could be seen as managerially-driven, it would be wise to consult the Ministries directly involved. The views of countries which have recently hosted a meeting, or which have agreed to do so in future, should be given particular weight.

Planning considerations

18 The proposal to align Ministerial meetings with a two year CHOGM cycle, or a four year cycle related to two CHOGMs, suggests a rigidity in approach which may be unnecessary, or which may not easily fit with the cycles of Commonwealth states or other international programmes. New Zealand, for example, has a triennial electoral cycle which may have consequences for contributions to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. The particular start dates for Commonwealth planning (years which are uneven, eg 2003, 2005 etc) are not necessarily those adopted by other international organisations. In fact it may be more fruitful to plan in yearly chunks, as do government departments in so many Commonwealth states, while seeking to steer in the same direction for one, two, three, four or more years. The planning need to move from the triennial cycle for most Ministerial meetings is, at the least, questionable.

Recommendations

19 Before proposing any alteration in the duration or frequency of Ministerial meetings the Executive Committee should satisfy itself that there has been a full canvass of the relevant Ministries, paying particular attention to the views of governments which have recently hosted, or will in future host a meeting of a particular type.

20 In the case of Commonwealth Health Ministers, which appears to be the first group to abandon a full-scale traditional meeting, the Commonwealth Secretariat should be requested to carry out a survey of delegations in Geneva in May, 2004 to establish their opinion on this change.

21 The Executive Committee should compare the list of Commonwealth countries which have hosted specialist Ministerial meetings over the last 20 years, with the list of countries which have hosted the CHOGM, and consider the significance of the specialist meetings for raising Commonwealth awareness.

22 The cost to host governments of Ministerial meetings of different types should be established. Governments should be encouraged to report these figures to their parliaments, acknowledging also the contribution of sponsors etc, in order to reduce the scope for misinformed criticism.

23 The Executive Committee should encourage the Commonwealth Secretariat, and host governments, to increase the publicity given to Ministerial meetings. It should compare the publicity given, in Commonwealth member countries, to short Ministerial meetings in non-Commonwealth locations with the publicity given to longer, traditional meetings held in Commonwealth capitals.

24 While it may be helpful to compare the number of eligible Ministers and delegations which attend any particular meeting, the Executive Committee should be mindful that there may still be considerable value for those who do come, and the host government, even if other delegations stay away or are headed by an official.

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