



## A Commonwealth of Ideas

### **Valedictory on leaving the Headship of the CPSU, by Richard Bourne**

The Commonwealth is a big idea. Those of us who work with it can sometimes lose sight of that, lost in rubbing pennies together, small rearguard actions, public disregard, day-to-day survival.

I would like to take this opportunity, kindly offered by the RCS, to say why I think the Commonwealth is a big idea, a valuable brand, a creative force. But I wish also to look coolly at how these assets have become obscured, at strategic changes affecting the Commonwealth, at what policy studies can contribute over the years ahead.

To my mind the Commonwealth is a big idea because it unites several important elements:

- It is voluntary, in that states may join, be suspended, or leave
- It has a rule-book, the 1991 Harare Declaration, managed by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group
- It aspires to be an association of peoples as well as governments
- It links countries which belong to different regional bodies, of differing cultures, of varied but generally improving levels of development
- It has values and a common working language which are the product of a specific if contested history
- It is in principle mutual, where everyone can give and everyone receive

However this big idea has become hopelessly overshadowed. Why?

- Few, if any governments, have a worked-out rationale for their participation in the Commonwealth
- It has been crowded-out and out-competed on the international scene by the growth of other bodies, seen as more essential or exciting to member governments and opinion-formers

- It is largely unknown to all but a few citizens, journalists and officials and their contacts may be infrequent, or in a context which makes the Commonwealth seem relatively insignificant
- Its intergovernmental agencies are tiny and under-funded
- It is not yet umbilically connected with any driving issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as it was to decolonisation and the struggle against racism and apartheid in the 20th
- It seems old, tired, and too tied to just one of its 53 member states

I would like to start this presentation by considering the huge current in which the Commonwealth, like all other institutions, is now swimming – globalisation. Few of us have taken on board the scale of change which is taking place, how it affects different communities, and where it may lead. Take an example in the United Kingdom. Our two richest football clubs, Manchester United and Chelsea, are now owned by an American and a Russian. When Chelsea plays Liverpool, billed as a clash of “English” clubs, only some of the fans and the two stadia are in England – the two managers, most of the players, and the great majority of those who watch the match on TV are from elsewhere.

Or take an example from Kenya, where textile factories are closing thanks to Chinese competition. In Upan Wasuna, a factory in Ruaraka on the outskirts of Nairobi, the so-called “Chinese tsunami” has this year led to the lay-off of all but 275 of 2,160 workers. The WTO’s Multifibre Agreement has undone the benefits of President Clinton’s African Growth and Opportunity Act, 2000, which had led to tariff-free entry for African goods to the US from countries where the rule of law and basic human rights are respected. Few African factories or workforces can match the £4 jeans, made in China and now sold in British supermarkets.

But this is not just a matter of rapid and disruptive economic change. Easier transport, and global awareness through TV and the internet, are leading to movements of peoples which governments cannot control. When Spain offered an amnesty to illegal immigrants in May, half a million people took advantage. In South Africa, in spite of attempts to eject Zimbabweans and others, the cities of gold continue to attract people from all over Africa, so that Hillbrow in Johannesburg, for example, now has a significant Nigerian population.

Counter-movements to globalisation, of the “buy local, think local” variety are stimulated by the marketplace in ideas which so many can now access. Identity politics flourish where symbols of identity, national or other, seem to be undermined or washed away. And globalisation, we should remember, has been around rather longer than sometimes realised. The Cold War, billed as a world-wide clash of ideologies, got going after 1945. The student upsurge of 1968 in Europe and North America, stimulated above all by television and reaction to the Vietnam War, had an element of globalisation about it. And interestingly, obituaries after the death of Pope John Paul II, pointed out that his travels and his world-wide influence had introduced a more global feel to what had always claimed to be a universal church.

And I would argue that the Commonwealth, as such, is not yet a global idea. Although there are Commonwealth countries in most parts of the world – though not so much in

the Middle East, the central Eurasian landmass, or Latin America – it is tied down by the geography of its 53 states, and the specificity of their historical experience. It could become better adapted to globalisation, and offer more to countries which do not belong, a point to which I will return.

The second major issue I would like to lay before you is that the Commonwealth is changing, in terms of the balance of power within it and the way in which it is perceived, yet few of us have kept pace with this. Part of the problem is that we here see the Commonwealth through London eyes, yet neither the London media nor the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, with its reduced number of High Commissions, keep a sharp eye on Commonwealth dimensions. Old stereotypes survive unchallenged where there are few regular updates, or updates which penetrate the wider consciousness.

In my view the two key changes in the balance of power within the Commonwealth are the rise of South Asia, and the fact that a significant number of countries are making a success of their development. South Asia's rise – particularly of India, but related to its neighbours and the improvement of Indo-Pakistani relations – has Commonwealth connotations. The use of English in South Asia, and the contribution of Non Resident Indians from Commonwealth countries and the United States, are significant both economically and politically. The UK's select committee on international development foresees that, before long, UK aid to India should be phased out as unnecessary. Already, in 2004, India's gross domestic product on a purchasing power parity basis was larger than the UK's, and a decade ago an Indian Prime Minister could describe 250M of his fellow-citizens as middle class.

Most Commonwealth-watchers have simply not attached due significance to the fact that the runners-up in the last two elections of the Secretary-General were from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It does not make sense now that India's contribution to the budget of the Commonwealth Secretariat is only just over a tenth of the UK's, at around £382,000 a year.

But progress in development is not limited to South Asia. From the Caribbean to the Mediterranean and southern Africa there are other success stories. The UN's World Development Report stated in 2004 that 13 of the 53 member states were found to have "high" human and economic development. For example, for over a decade the gross domestic product per person of Singapore has been higher than that of New Zealand, a country which is currently represented by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Institute. It is a serious and possibly racist distortion of present reality to describe the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as the only "developed" states in the Commonwealth, implying that others will never stop being "developing".

If the balance of power within the Commonwealth is changing, and I would argue strongly that the budget formula for government subscriptions is overdue for reform, so I think is the way the association is perceived. The main change is that most governments do not think about the Commonwealth very often, and then not in a holistic way. Commonwealth ministerial meetings are part of a wider tapestry of international engagement, and their threads do not always shine the brightest. The

sheer volume of international diplomacy not only obscures the Commonwealth, but when politicians, officials and journalists come to look at a Commonwealth event they do so filled with the baggage of others.

Commonwealth things are too often seen as small, occasional, and events. Yet small things are not good for inspiring ambition, vision and the determination to achieve rather more. Krishan Srinivasan, former Deputy Secretary-General, has coined the expression “Nobody’s Commonwealth” to describe an organisation which he believes is politically orphaned. The situation is in some ways more serious. There is too little sense of ownership anywhere, by politicians or others, and a residual sense that the British will continue to look after the association for reasons of historic pride and present influence, is probably misplaced. In the UK the Commonwealth is too small to matter, yet large enough to cut.

It is vital that the sense of ownership is raised, and spread. This will certainly require more intergovernmental bodies like the Commonwealth of Learning, in Vancouver, and the non-governmental Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in New Delhi, to build strong presences far from London. It is good news that a Commonwealth Tourism Centre is being set up in Kuala Lumpur.

So where does a Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit come in? What have we learnt over the past seven years? Many of you will have glanced at our website, [www.cpsu.org.uk](http://www.cpsu.org.uk) and seen the extent of activities conducted by upwards of 20 people, over this time. They range from a review of election observing in the Commonwealth, to the extension of IT by public-private partnerships, from what universities can do to promote development, to being key organiser of one of the three biennial Diversity Matters fora, from seeing how the Commonwealth and European Union can support NEPAD, to setting up Commonwealth Clubs in schools. Virtually all of our studies have been funded by specific budgets. It takes two to three years on average to develop the concept and obtain the resources for each study.

The broad headings which we have followed since a 1998 feasibility study are two: the impact of globalisation, and a Harare programme, looking at some of the implications of the 1991 Harare Declaration in terms of democratisation, the strengthening of civil society, and human rights.

A member of our Advisory Board, Martin Woollacott, remarked early on that there was the risk of a “Kew Gardens” effect for the CPSU. That is, the Commonwealth has such a variety of countries and cultures that almost any topic can be investigated in a comparative way. But the danger then is to assume that people and organisations in the Commonwealth could be stimulated to look at an issue, or look seriously at CPSU recommendations. One could carry out a classic “needs analysis” of issues in the 53 countries, but there would be no guarantee that the Commonwealth could be dynamised to follow up.

Hence we realised early on that a Policy Studies Unit for the Commonwealth simply cannot behave like a think-tank in a single country, where one produces a report and that’s it – the ideas are either picked up or rejected. In our case the obtaining of funding, the carrying out of a study, and the implementation of at least some of the proposals, form a seamless process. We may work on the role of civil society and the

Commonwealth, and the need for Commonwealth bodies to reengage with youth, but this cannot be in the abstract. To make a serious contribution we have found ourselves setting up Commonwealth Clubs in secondary schools, supporting a toolkit for organisations which want to offer something to young people, and launching a summer conference for Master's students in their mid-20s.\*\* There is a shortage in the Commonwealth of persons and organisations with the capacity to carry out programmes, rather than just mount workshops and events.

Working in the Commonwealth requires a good deal of stamina, not least because liaising with 53 countries is technically difficult, and the Commonwealth is not a framework that many use. In the UK, for example, the DFID thinks only of developing countries in the Commonwealth and is not interested in Cyprus or Australia, for instance; the Africa Commission took the whole continent as its parish, deliberately moving beyond the Commonwealth member states. In Pakistan, in my experience, the Commonwealth is still often seen as a surrogate for links with the UK, and it might require a change in mindset to run an Islamabad-based Commonwealth programme serving the whole of South Asia, Africa and the Pacific.

To stimulate the Commonwealth, and get it moving in a significant fashion, requires a theme which responds to sentiment in a cross-section of countries. It may be a global theme but it has to be something for which the Commonwealth is a special and appropriate instrument. The anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, and the effort for democratisation and human rights in the 1990s, are recent successful examples. But what themes might have resonance over the next decade?

There are three which occur to me – climate change, particularly with regard to islands, coastlines and marine issues; migration, economic, refugee and tourist; and the area of development and democracy which was opened up by the Manmohan Singh report and the Abuja summit in 2003.

“Save our shores, save our seas” could be the slogan for a climate change awakening in the Commonwealth which could encompass everything from coral death to the running down of fish stocks, from the flooding of low-lying islands to the destruction of popular beaches. Because of its history the Commonwealth has an intimate connection with and understanding of marine and insular issues. Major countries which are not islands, such as Nigeria, Canada or India, have lengthy coastlines. And the Commonwealth, whose conference of meteorologists has been meeting regularly since the 1920s, has relevant expertise on climate change.

Migration issues have always been important for the Commonwealth and, with cheap flights and the growing awareness of different living standards promoted by globalisation, they have become more important still. I always thought that it was impossible to have free movement of capital without freer movement of labour, and there is an element of thumbs in dykes about efforts to prevent this. Only rising living standards for poorer communities, as well perhaps as carbon taxes on cheap air fuel, will make much difference.

But the issue needs to be looked at from the viewpoint of Commonwealth citizens, as well as governments. Present visa arrangements, even for tourists, are unjust. The UK imposed a blanket ban on young Nigerians coming to the UK earlier this year. Yet

UK citizens still get visa-free entry to several other Commonwealth states. I recall that, in 1990, my friend Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, the Nigerian human rights campaigner, missed a flight to New Zealand because there was no New Zealand High Commission in his country but he had to have a visa.

Now that Tourism Ministers are meeting regularly I would hope that visa requirements may be re-examined, abolished where possible and standardised where they cannot be. A “Which?” type analysis of how long it takes to get various Commonwealth visas in different capitals, and what they cost, should be part of the evidence. It is not clear to me that visas, which can be fraudulently obtained by terrorists and criminals without difficulty, currently provide any security for the public. Passports, which contain biometric information, may provide more protection.

But broader migration questions need to be reviewed. At present the spotlight moves erratically – on people-smuggling, globe-trotting by criminals and terrorists, or the movement of qualified health and education personnel. But it ought to be possible to pull more of these things together, and in a broader Commonwealth perspective. There is work to be done here, by Labour Ministers as well as Tourism Ministers, and by think-tanks as well as intergovernmental bodies.

Thirdly, I believe there is still a great deal of mileage in the development and democracy agenda which, one way or another, the Commonwealth has been pursuing at least since 1991. It is a leitmotif for the association, and the crucial distinction between the respective growth strategies of China and India. Nonetheless some Millennium Development Goals are likely to be missed by some Commonwealth countries, and democracy is a work in progress, rather than a state of perfection that any have reached.

I realised this, incidentally, when I recently studied the presidential website for the Maldives, now moving towards a multiparty system. You will have noted with interest that President Gayoom, elected with 92.9% of the vote in 1978, was still building his popularity a decade later when his vote hit 96.4%, but then suffered a modest loss of confidence by 1998, when his vote fell to 90.9%. Can any country whose leader stays in office for nearly 30 years be truly described as democratic? Has the Commonwealth, post 1991, been too complacent? It is a question that reverberates from the Maldives to Uganda and Cameroon.

But more can be done to put the Commonwealth at the forefront of the development and democracy debate. In 2007, in Kampala, Heads of Government will elect the fifth Secretary General of the Commonwealth. The battle to succeed Don McKinnon will start at the end of this year, in conversations round the edge of the Valletta summit. Yet there is clearly a democratic deficit in an association of peoples, which leaves it to their political leaders alone to choose a Chief Executive. Civil society organisations in the Commonwealth are rightly concerned at the limited contact they have with leaders and officials at Commonwealth summits, but they can do something about it.

Next year I would like to see Commonwealth organisations as well as countries indicating the kind of Chief Executive they would like in post for the next term. I would like to see candidates setting out their practical visions. I would like to see organised debates, in a number of capitals, where the candidates could make

speeches, answer questions, and make their case. Campaigns could turn not only on ideas, but on resources – for a successful candidate should have a coalition of governments behind him or her which are prepared to invest more in the Commonwealth, for agreed objectives.

Now is the time for Commonwealth parliaments, linked to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and country-based Commonwealth societies, linked to the Royal Commonwealth Society, to put together such a world-wide hustings. And the Commonwealth Foundation, with its vocation for civil society, should be able to help. This will strengthen the sense of international ownership of what is, when you think about it rationally, a big idea.

Finally, I should say that in my own view, many common sentiments about the Commonwealth are inaccurate, illusory or out of date. It is not always good at the skills sometimes ascribed to it. Take conflict resolution. It has not made much contribution to the Kashmir dispute, to the Sri Lankan civil war, to ending the guerrilla warfare in northern Uganda. On the other hand it has been, in its various manifestations, rather better at the more laborious, jaw-jaw building of democratic and parliamentary practices, with workshops and support for MPs, leaders of government and opposition, and political reporters. It is quite good at helping damaged countries, from Sierra Leone to Mozambique, South Africa and the Solomons, to recuperate.

Just because some Commonwealth influences are almost subterranean, or the product of meetings at conferences and in pubs, it does not mean that they don't count. Around 30 years ago, Commonwealth actors were significant agents in securing the Law of the Sea; within the last three years Health Ministers played a catalytic role in achieving the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control at Geneva. Not a lot of people know. In the UK the decisions to set up an independent Electoral Commission, to end the practice by which a cabinet minister is head of the judiciary and to separate a Supreme Court from the second legislative chamber, reflect good Commonwealth practice, and the Latimer House principles adopted at Abuja in 2003.

With globalisation, the Commonwealth and its agencies are going to have to work more with others – the UN, the OIC, the EU, AU, Francophonie and others still. This may involve going outside traditional boundaries. Why, for instance, should the Commonwealth, which has many speakers of French, not help to observe next year's election in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

The Commonwealth and its agencies will be judged harshly by what they can do, which means recruiting the best people. A senior figure at the Commonwealth Secretariat told me last week that he recalled a time in the late 1980s when permanent secretaries in Ministries were happy to take jobs as deputy directors of divisions in the Secretariat, because of its excitement, and the respect in which the Secretariat was held. Is this still true?

There is a challenge to inspire more affection from Commonwealth citizens, especially those under 40, and deliver more to them than declarations and periodic meetings, which may never be reported or are quickly forgotten.

There is a need to adapt. The servants of the Commonwealth must engage more with new ideas and different people, so that they cannot be brushed aside as a tiny coterie, hanging on to memories. They must pull together more – one of the strongest messages from the Coolum CHOGM in 2002 – so that the Commonwealth is less fuzzy, more real, no longer to be dismissed as motherhood and apple pie. They must promote ideas as well as values, be less afraid of pioneering, of choices, of being criticised and of controversy. Where the intergovernmental institutions are hobbled by the need for consensus, non-governmental ones should speak out. NGOs have been speaking out vigorously on the present crisis in Zimbabwe; they should also be planning how to help in reconstruction in a post-Mugabe era.

A conference here on 24 June, 40 years after the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Foundation were born, reminded us that our international resource of intelligence is enormous and undervalued. Expert groups such as Harold Lever's, which worked on debt in 1983, and the group which looked at the impact of structural adjustment on women in the 1990s, have provided intellectual leadership for the world. Some influential exercises have been non-governmental, like Flora MacDonald's "Put our world to rights" of 1991, and Tom Symons' "Learning from each other" in the mid-90s.

One way and another I have been doing Commonwealth things since the end of 1982, when I became Deputy Director of the late lamented Commonwealth Institute of Kensington High Street. After that I was proud to get a non-governmental coalition the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative off the ground, working with others to establish the principle that a citizen of the Commonwealth is a citizen with rights. I am now stepping down from the Headship of the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in Russell Square. Some would undoubtedly think I have been wasting my time, in the service of an association which Enoch Powell dismissed as a chimera 40 years ago.

They and he are wrong. The only items lacking in today's Commonwealth are knowledge of what it does and could do better, and energy and stamina among those who are fortunate enough to have that understanding. I have never been under the illusion that the Commonwealth is the finest thing since sliced bread, but like one of Cromwell's troopers I have known what I fought for, and have loved what I knew. I have made many friends, and they have done more for me than I have been able to do for them. In a more modest, less time-consuming and frankly less financially risky way, I may be able to help a little in future.

And hopefully many younger citizens in our 53 countries will also come to cherish what is still a stunningly big idea.

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**14 July 2005**