



A presentation on 2 March 2005 in Kolkata at the third Diversity Matters Forum, supported by the Australian Multicultural Foundation, The Statesman newspaper, the Commonwealth Foundation, the CPSU and the Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements

### **Leadership and Interfaith Initiatives for the Commonwealth – a Multifaith Advisory Council for the Commonwealth**

Richard Bourne, Head, Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit<sup>1</sup>

Greetings. I would like to start with a statement of the obvious. The Commonwealth is a secular institution, not a religious one. However the values it has tried to promote since its leaders met in Singapore in 1971 coincide with those of major religions: international peace, equal rights for all regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief, human dignity, and the removal of wide disparities in living conditions. Indeed, in almost religious language which was repeated in Harare in 1991, the leaders recognised “racial prejudice and intolerance as a dangerous sickness and a threat to healthy development, and racial discrimination as an unmitigated evil.” The Commonwealth is seen as a “safe space”, and a kind of civil society within the international community.

But the voluntary and rather loose ties which bring together 53 nations in today’s Commonwealth are not religious. They are ties between governments for political and economic purposes, ties between professional groups for occupational exchange and between civil society for cooperation, and a shared heritage about which most citizens now know rather little. In 1986 when I was responsible for coordinating a Caribbean Focus in the United Kingdom – a series of cultural and educational activities run out

---

<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, founded in 1998 after a feasibility study, is based at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London University. It works with project funding and its output is published on a website: [www.cpsu.org.uk](http://www.cpsu.org.uk)

of the then Commonwealth Institute, Kensington – it was with some trepidation that I arranged a special Caribbean service in Westminster Abbey, London. However the Caribbean is deeply influenced by Christian religions, and I was persuaded that it would be appropriate to celebrate the region in this way. The event was suitably joyful, musical and well-supported.

While the Commonwealth itself is a secular institution two rather small but significant religious groups have used its political geography to their benefit. One is the Church of England, the established Christian religion in England whose Supreme Governor is the Queen, who is also Head of the Commonwealth. The other is Judaism, where the Chief Rabbi of orthodox Jewry in the United Kingdom is styled “Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth” and a Commonwealth Jewish Council was set up in late 1982.

Both of these groupings are numerically tiny, by comparison with the significance of Hinduism, Islam or even Roman Catholicism among Commonwealth citizens. But the position of Anglicanism and Judaism in the Commonwealth is nonetheless interesting, and relevant to our discussion this afternoon. Anglicanism, although it now has some of its 70M adherents inside and outside the Commonwealth, spread widely throughout the British colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the high status new religion of the governors, traders, military officers and missionaries. Today it is said that the fastest-growing provinces of the Anglican Church are in Nigeria, and tension between African Anglicans and Anglo-Saxon Anglicans has led to serious disputes over women priests, homosexuality and other issues.

The Queen is Supreme Governor of the Church of England. This is a ceremonial post. She is not like the Pope, laying down doctrine and requiring spiritual obedience. However she has a certain authority over a handful of churches in England known as “royal peculiars”, notably Westminster Abbey, which has been described as a national shrine. Using this authority she has encouraged the Abbey authorities, over more than two decades, to develop a multifaith observance on Commonwealth Day, the second Monday in every March. This year, for instance, there will be a role for a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim, a Baha’i, a Sikh, for members of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Churches, for Buddhists and Hindus, for Zoroastrians and Jains, for Free Churches, Orthodox Christianity and for Anglicans. They make affirmations which all the faiths can support.

This multifaith observance, now followed elsewhere in the Commonwealth, is a creative development which has taken advantage of the coincidence that the Head of the Commonwealth is also Supreme Governor of the Church of England. It is now accepted. To begin with it was opposed by some fundamentalist Anglicans, who worried that their cathedral was giving space to other faiths.

The relation of Judaism to the Commonwealth also seems to have developed by osmosis, in that the Chief Rabbi served orthodox congregations in the former British Empire and then became Chief Rabbi to the Commonwealth. However there may have been a political incentive to the establishment of the Commonwealth Jewish Council, by communities of differing branches of religious Judaism from 16 countries in late 1982. For this followed a commercial hiring of space in the former

Commonwealth Institute, Kensington for a Palestinian cultural exhibition, to the irritation of some Jewish groups.

I will not now discuss the Diversity Action Programme, proposed by Colin Ball, which I hope he will develop, but the proposal for a Multifaith Advisory Council for the Commonwealth. In considering the possible scope for such a Council, therefore, it is important to remember that none of the larger religions which are active in our 53 states are using it as an organisational framework. There is no Commonwealth Hindu Council, no Commonwealth Islamic Council, no Commonwealth Catholic Council. This could be an advantage.

So how could a Multifaith Council be set up? How representative would it be? What would it do?

The first two questions run together. It is impossible to imagine that a Multifaith Council could be fully representative of the huge diversity of faiths in today's Commonwealth, with over 30,000 separate sects in Christianity alone. Given the variations in Hinduism or the Christian churches even a large body could not do justice to them. While the Pope may rely on an infallible absolutism in representing Catholicism few other church leaders have such authority; their ability rests on their personal wisdom, spirituality and diplomacy.

Hence, however it is set up, a Multifaith Council would not be endowed with authority from the start. It would have to earn it. Furthermore its membership would probably be by selection, not election, and not all churches, temples or mosques would necessarily wish to be involved. How could it be set up in the first place?

Some countries already have inter-faith bodies: it would be possible to invite them to send representatives to an inaugural meeting. In the United Kingdom, for instance, such organisations exist. Furthermore, the Westminster Abbey mechanisms under which nine faiths collaborate to support the Commonwealth Day Observance in London could be brought into play.

More important than the mechanics and running costs of a Multifaith Advisory Council is the question – what is it supposed to do? My own reply would be that it should concern itself with those issues, which have a religious connotation, which lead to conflict or discrimination, damaging to individuals and communities in Commonwealth countries. Jawaharlal Nehru once referred to the Commonwealth's "healing touch," in a description that has been quoted by successive Secretaries-General. A Multifaith Advisory Council could introduce a "healing touch" where religions come into conflict.

This will not be easy. Right across Africa there is a line from Uganda and Sudan in the east across to Nigeria in the west, where Christianity and Islam rub against each other. In my own country Muslims have complained of discrimination in England, and in Northern Ireland the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics mix issues of religion and national identity. In South Asia over the last decade there have been serious conflicts between Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka, between different Muslim groups in Pakistan, and between Hindus and Muslims in India.

Quite often the religious differences are linked to issues of identity, ethnicity, class, power and wealth. Religion may be the presenting problem, but it is far from the whole explanation of a conflict. It becomes a badge, and an extraterrestrial justification for lack of compromise. A Multifaith Council would have to recognise its limitations. It might help to take the sting from religious differences, but it would not be able to lift disadvantaged groups out of poverty.

Nonetheless it would have to consider more than the obvious religious problems – as when children from other religions are unable to attend a Church of England school in Britain, or minority religions are threatened when a majority Muslim state introduces sharia law in Nigeria. It should focus on discrimination. And it should look specially hard at “double minority” issues where religion so often prevents compromise in identity quarrels.

By “double minority” I refer to antagonistic communities where each sees itself as the victim of the other. For example in Northern Ireland a Catholic minority sees itself as a minority; but simultaneously the Northern Ireland Protestants see themselves as a minority on the island of Ireland. In partitioned Cyprus the Turkish-Cypriots who are Muslims see themselves as a minority, but the Greek Cypriots, who are Orthodox Christians, see themselves ( and Greece ) as over-neighbouring by the more populous country of Turkey. Similar issues have arisen in Sri Lanka.

Most but not all Commonwealth countries see themselves as secular, and protecting freedom of worship for all faiths. But a Multifaith Council could look at the reality of secularism and freedom. It could help to protect couples who marry across religious divisions, and the rights of their children. It could also comment on the way in which faiths promote themselves, in towns, on the airwaves, and by association with elite opportunities. In Nigeria, for instance, there are “prosperity churches” which claim to offer religion as a fast-track route to riches, but simultaneously tax adherents for a tenth of their income. Their leaders rarely demonstrate a Christ-like poverty. It might be appropriate for the Council to remark on types of recruitment or proselytising which take advantage of the gullible, or annoy other faiths.

The Council could also promote the virtues of religious diversity, as part of the essence of humanity. We do not all think the same way, pray the same way or in the dreadful cliché, sing from the same hymn sheet. This is not just a matter of our rights, or differing understandings of the transcendent spiritual life. As with biodiversity in the natural world this is an aspect of evolution; some religions and quasi-religions are born, some die. Many people have little religion or none, though that does not stop them sometimes from enlisting behind religious banners.

It would be unrealistic to expect a Multifaith Advisory Council to blur the real differences between faiths. The complexities of Hindu religion or West African animism will always be a world away from the monotheistic view of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, where there is only one God. A Multifaith Advisory Council for Commonwealth Values, though these values could be those which leaders of many faiths might support, might seem to the religious to be placing their own beliefs at the service of a secular creed, which was the lowest denomination which could be agreed by international politicians. A certain vagueness about a Multifaith Advisory Council, as with the Commonwealth itself, could be helpful.

More to the point is the question, what would such a Council do? Will it make pronouncements on general issues, or specific crises? Will it send fact-finding teams to such places as Gujerat, Northern Ireland or Uganda? Will it have a research capability? Will it issue best practice guidelines? Will it be used for purposes of mediation? Will it answer the cry of persecuted communities? Will it, at bottom, be a serious contribution to resolving issues which lead to much unhappiness, cruelty and in the worst cases, loss of property and life? And in our noisy modern world, will it be listened to?

Ideally the Council would do such things, but its capacity will depend on its resources. Its resources will, in turn, depend on the amount of support it can generate from the organised religions. There are, as I mentioned earlier, building blocks in position in some countries – such as the council for Christians, Jews and Muslims in the United Kingdom, or the Inter-faith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, in northern Nigeria, and other bodies we have learnt about today, in Australia and Malaysia. But it would be important that early support was forthcoming from a range of key countries and especially in India itself. This is because over half the population of the Commonwealth lives in India, because of India's religious diversity, and because its secular democracy has set an example to all other states since independence. Maybe from this conference we will see a new stimulus within India, and a lead from Kolkata to the wider Commonwealth.

Later this year there will be an opportunity to take these ideas further, at the Commonwealth People's Forum in Malta which runs from 21 to 25 November, just prior to the political meeting in Valletta of the Commonwealth Heads of Government. The Forum is a biennial event, which began in 1997 and which is supported by the Commonwealth Foundation. As you know the Foundation, an inter-governmental body which promotes civil society, has consistently supported the sequence of Diversity Matters conferences and has again helped to fund this one.

A proposal emerging from here could be put to a meeting in Malta. But before that meeting it would be important to see whether there is likely to be backing from interfaith groups in key countries, and whether some funding may be found. There are a number of philanthropic trusts and foundations which exist to promote religion, or religious education in Commonwealth countries; indeed the advancement of religion is, along with education and the relief of poverty, a traditional charitable purpose. However many of these foundations are narrow or sectarian in their objectives, rather than multifaith. One exception might be the John Templeton Foundation in the United Kingdom.

A project steering group and reputable sponsors will be required. In the first instance it may be easier to get a relatively small grant for a feasibility study, based on the results of this conference and a discussion in Malta. It would then be possible to get the Council going, with a membership, remit, priorities and budget, in the course of 2006.

But I do not want to conclude with a list of mechanics, important as they are. One has to persuade others to the view that a Multifaith Advisory Council for the Commonwealth is a good, exciting proposal which can make a positive difference to

people's lives. In 1987, as a result of a conference not unlike this but held at Cumberland Lodge near Windsor in the United Kingdom, I and others became convinced that the Commonwealth needed to do much more to uphold the human rights of citizens. This had not been a political priority for its leaders, though arguably it was implicit in statements they had espoused. A group of us, and a group of non-governmental Commonwealth associations, decided to press this case against some opposition and more apathy. And we have achieved some positive changes, from the Commonwealth Harare Declaration of 1991 to the establishment of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, now based in New Delhi.

I am sure that the idea of a Multifaith Advisory Council for the Commonwealth will also meet some opposition, and more apathy. But it is a challenge worth taking up. It is easy enough in the Commonwealth to have a bright idea – a great deal harder to realise it!

**Richard Bourne**  
**February, 2005**