

TEXT OF WELCOME ADDRESS
BY ALAN PERRY
HEAD, COMMONWEALTH POLICY STUDIES UNIT

To
HIS EXCELLENCY AL HAJI AHMED SANI YARIMA BAKURA
GOVERNOR OF NIGERIA'S ZAMFARA STATE
at 28 Russell Square, London WC18 5DS
on 12 July 2006 at 1800h.

Your Excellency Al Haji Ahmed Sani Yarima Bakura, Governor of Zamfara State,
Members of your delegation, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends

For those who don't know me already, I'm Alan Perry, and I'm the Head of the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit. First of all I would like to welcome you all here this evening and in particular to thank my colleague Frank Soodeen for organising it at quite short notice.

Let me, at the outset, extend a warm welcome to the Governor and his delegation. We are much looking forward to hearing, Governor, what you have to say.

Before giving the Governor the floor I need to say few words about the CPSU and about this event. The CPSU was set up six years ago to provide the Commonwealth with a think tank, to stimulate analysis and debate, the sharing and circulation of information between Commonwealth States which have so much in common, including common problems, to stimulate research, analysis, and so, indirectly, to raise the quality of policy-making at every level. This is a noble aim, and the Commonwealth provides such a brilliant set of forums for the exchange of ideas that the CPSU has already been able to achieve a remarkable amount during the first six years of its existence.

There are a few instructive paradoxes about the CPSU. One is that although we are headquartered in London, we are not a British institution, - CPSU exists to serve the Commonwealth as a whole. A second is that although the CPSU has its headquarters in this building which belongs to the uniquely prestigious Institute of Commonwealth Studies, and although in our work we deploy the highest calibre of academic skills, we are not an academic institution. Our objectives are fundamentally different: we exist primarily to provide a *policy*-research service to policy makers and to the Commonwealth. A third paradox is that although the CPSU is independent, takes orders from no-one and examines issues analytically and as far as possible free from prejudices and preconceptions – yet at the same time we are certainly not value – free: on the contrary, we are committed, and most powerfully committed (many of us are, after all, working for love, not money), to Commonwealth values as embodied in the Harare Declaration, including the rule of law, democracy and government by consent, human rights, tolerance, the maintenance of peace, and sustainable development. So we are not in any way politically or morally neutral, although it goes without saying that we don't take positions on countries' internal politics. That kind of partisanship is totally foreign to our role.

I took over as the second Head of the CPSU on 1 April. We intend to expand our activities markedly, because there is a strong need for them. One of the many ways we will do so is through an Events Programme, featuring meetings such as this one, to stimulate debate and even controversy, but in a calm and cerebral atmosphere, probing beneath the usual layers of prejudice, ignorance, polemic, confusion and obfuscation to examine problems carefully and in the round, looking for explanation,

comprehension and rational discussion. That doesn't mean we think that tolerance is invariably appropriate – sometimes it isn't. And it doesn't mean we are against plain talk - quite the reverse, plain talk is essential to the process of thought itself and the only way we can all learn from collective experience. But we do this in a constructive spirit, and our method is calm, rational enquiry and courteous debate. We certainly do engage with controversial ideas, but we are not in business to generate heat. Our business is to generate light.

Our aim for this evening, therefore, is that both we and all of you, our guests, will emerge not only better informed and with better understanding, but also a little *wiser* than when we came in.

Against that background, we are looking forward to your address, Governor, in which I believe you will argue that, at a time of seemingly great cultural dissonance, Africa has lessons to offer the wider world.

As it happens, like my father before me, I know and love Nigeria. Nigeria is a great country with a huge and gifted population. But Nigeria is in a way rather like the CPSU: there are many paradoxes about it. Nigeria has a very strong sense of nationhood, but suffers from grave divisions, notably between its different religious and cultural traditions. Its potential wealth and opportunities are immense, but its problems are on a quite breathtaking scale, including in particular political instability, ethnic and religious strife, poverty, underdevelopment and corruption. Nigeria has wonderful young people, and millions of them, but seems unable to do anything like enough to educate them. Nigeria has elaborate democratic institutions, but – and I trust this period is now over - has in the past suffered a series of military coups. Nigeria has been oil rich for several decades, but sometimes the riches have been more of a curse than a blessing.

You, Governor, are on any view a major Nigerian political figure and no stranger to controversy. Perhaps you first came to *international* prominence when in January 2000 you inaugurated legal reforms in Zamfara to incorporate Islamic penal laws, as interpreted by the Maliki School of Islamic law. This was widely interpreted in the "West" as the adoption of Shari'ah Law in the State of Zamfara, though as an international lawyer of some standing myself, I am highly conscious that we have to ask ourselves quite a number of careful questions about what has really happened. I hope you will help us to understand.

The move in Zamfara State was quickly followed in some other States of the Federation. These developments were welcomed by some, but were greeted with consternation and in fact alarm by many who were directly affected and by, I think, the majority of international observers, both Muslims and non-Muslims but particularly the latter, and both inside and outside Nigeria.

There will be a number of people here who are quite knowledgeable and quite sympathetic to Islam, who are deeply concerned about a range of resulting questions, concerning human rights, the equality of peoples before the law, government by consent, the status of women, the nature of Islamic punishments, and the implications for political and social stability in Nigeria. We look forward, Governor, to hearing what you have to say about these concerns.

Two months ago you declared yourself a candidate in the presidential election to succeed President Obasanjo. So your views on a wide range of issues are of great interest. Of course it is a great honour to be President of Nigeria. But it is also a huge burden. The late President de Gaulle, used to say "Gouverner, c'est choisir"

– to govern, is to choose. In other words, at the heart of the governmental process a head of State or Head of Government faces – if he is lucky and if he is not too boxed in already – a series of choices. To reflective observers it is obvious, moreover, that the choices governments face are frequently simply choices between greater and lesser evils. At the end of the day, policy decisions are central to the role of governments. This, of course, is the field on which we focus at the CPSU.

Ladies and gentlemen, when the Governor has finished speaking, I will invite him to take questions and will then throw the topics raised open for general debate. You will have a further opportunity to engage with the Governor and his delegation over a reception which will continue here until 8.15.

I now have pleasure in inviting you, Governor, to take the floor.

