

**“The future of the modern Commonwealths:  
Widening vs. deepening?”**

**Seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies**

**10 October 2005**

**Aide-memoire**

by

**Victoria te Velde-Ashworth**

## **Introduction**

As the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation finish celebrating their fortieth anniversary and prepare for the Malta CHOGM, there is a sense in some quarters that the Commonwealth is once again at a cross-roads. Despite a lack of interest from the media, the Commonwealth is undergoing some fundamental changes. Notwithstanding the internal soul searching, the lure of the Commonwealth remains strong. In fact the reach of the Commonwealth continues to expand. The non-state Commonwealth is burgeoning and there is once again talk of a queue to the inter-state Commonwealth. But how should the Commonwealth react to these developments? In this aide-memoire we see how the membership criteria of the Commonwealth have evolved and continue to adapt to the times. The effects of globalisation has meant the organisation is both deepening and widening. As a result of this dual development, certain tensions can be detected. Some of these are a necessary side effect of progress, but others point to the need for a review of the current accession rules and procedures. This aide-memoire sets out to first examine issues of widening of the Commonwealth, it then focuses on deepening and the last section turns to the future.

## **Widening**

The Commonwealth emerged from the ashes of empire. It was a positive response to the changing world order. First the Dominions and following the Second World War, the colonies one by one demanded equality and independence. However, with the exception of a handful<sup>1</sup> all parts of the former empire, joined the Commonwealth on attaining independence. It is this gradual growth (widening) of the Commonwealth that defines how its membership criteria have evolved. Initially, there were no republics in the organisation, then the first monarchy was admitted, the first African country to join was another milestone, as was the first micro-state and finally Mozambique as the first (and last?) country with no connection to the former empire. Each of these turning points was heavily debated within the organisation. In the 1950s and again in the 1990s high level reviews were held to examine the rapid expansion of the association. It was not until 1997 that hard and fast rules were agreed that would govern future accession.

Procedures surrounding Commonwealth accession are often consider to be shrouded in mystique. Diplomatic circles are conventional, formal and shun the public glare. And so it is with accession to the Commonwealth. Once a government (or individuals within the government) have decided they wish to join the Commonwealth, then the first stage is one of mutual sounding out. Informal discussions may be held with ComSec or as has happened in the past, at one of the British High Commissions. From these preliminary talks the applicant will gain a sense of whether there is any point in pursuing the application. If it is likely to be well received by Commonwealth governments or influential leaders, then an official letter will be sent to Marlborough House which then may or may not make its way on to the following CHOGM Agenda. In the mean time there will be much lobbying and political wrangling. Consensus is required to admit a new member. In the past there was talk of countries being 'blackballed', nevertheless, no country so far has ever been turned down as such. Instead they are 'held under review'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Myanmar, Sudan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Sudan and the UAE. Ireland joined and later left the Commonwealth in 1949.

Reasons for wanting to join the Commonwealth differ from country to country. The increase of multilateralism has made governments even more conscious of the benefits and necessity of joining regional and multilateral organisations. In the case of the Commonwealth, it is undoubtedly the opportunity for quiet diplomacy in and around the CHOGMs and Ministerial Meetings that attracts much outside interest. Another reason states may wish to join, is for the regular meetings of Commonwealth ambassadors that take place in a large number of non-member states. While some states see it as a means of expressing their cultural heritage, others may use it to realign the country. Further benefits of membership include: co-operation and consolation with a large number of governments, equal access to the larger members, furthering areas of common concern, economic and technical assistance and the list goes on. As well as benefits, there are also obligations. An annual contribution is made by each member. There are growing calls to review the amounts contributed, to reflect current national income. The other key obligation is adherence to principles set out in the Harare Declaration. There are also potential benefits and costs of widening for the non-state Commonwealth. Several of these associations have already opened up their membership to individuals/institutions from beyond the Commonwealth. The effects of globalisation are likely to accelerate this trend.

Mozambique's accession to the Commonwealth in 1995 was a significant event in terms of membership. It was the first and so far only member to have been admitted that did not have a constitutional link with an existing member. At the time Mozambique's accession was described as an 'exception'. The Commonwealth had worked closely with Mozambique in the struggle against apartheid. Throughout this period the Commonwealth provided crucial financial and technical assistance to Mozambique. The latter became regarded as a 'Commonwealth cousin' and from 1987 began attending CHOGMs in the wings. Unlike many other international organisations, the Commonwealth does not have an observer status. So following the end of apartheid and the reduction of Commonwealth assistance to Mozambique the question arose as to whether Mozambique could formalise its relationship with the Commonwealth. Mozambique is surrounded by Commonwealth states and these lent their support to Mozambique's application. The overriding factor however, was the personal intervention by Nelson Mandela the then President of South Africa at the 1995 CHOGM in Auckland. Compromise was reached and Mozambique was admitted, however it was also agreed that there would be a tightening of membership criteria in order to control further expansion of the organisation.

The Edinburgh CHOGM in 1997 endorsed the findings of the Inter-Governmental Group on Criteria for Commonwealth Membership (IGCCM). This was a first step in codifying the membership criteria. The new rules required that applicants should

- as a rule have had a constitutional link with an existing Commonwealth member
- that it endorse the principles set out in the Harare Declaration (1991)
- that it is a sovereign state
- that there is general endorsement in the applicant country
- that it accepts the use of English as the language of Commonwealth communications
- that it acknowledges the role of the Queen as the Head of the Commonwealth.

With the introduction of the 1997 rules, the queue of applicants was expected to wither away. Indeed most of the applicants who had enquired about membership technically became ineligible for membership for various reasons. The new rules however, have not deterred applicants from applying as expected. Since 1997 some countries that fall outside of the new criteria have continued to express an interest in joining the Commonwealth.

Since the 1997 criteria were introduced the following countries and nations, to varying degrees, have all expressed an interest in membership<sup>2</sup>: Palestine, Somaliland, Yemen, Rwanda, Timor Leste, Irian (West Papuan). However, there are also a number of other countries that have enquired about membership prior to 1997. These include Ireland, Israel, Myanmar, Angola and Cambodia. Of these, some could feasibly become eligible under the new membership rules, others for historical reasons never will. Notwithstanding this point, every time an enquiry is made to ComSec, the applicant's case will be examined on its own merit.

There are a number of countries that although eligible on historical grounds (albeit not currently in compliance with the Harare Criteria) could one day apply for membership. Notably these are all situated in the Middle East<sup>3</sup>. Palestine and Yemen are the only Middle Eastern nations so far, to have expressed an interest in membership. Another country that technically could join is the USA. This will not happen for reasons of power politics. Nevertheless, Americans are quietly(?) very active in the informal Commonwealth. Americans are the second largest group of members in the RCS for example.

### **Deepening**

Deepening is closer integration within the Commonwealth. This, in the form of increased governmental discussions, growth of inter country NGOs and greater inter-Commonwealth business relations. The benefits of deepening for states is one of closer cooperation and consultation with other members. This leads to such things as joint declarations and shared principles of conduct. For business the benefits include a common language, business culture, communication networks, stability and potentially a common/regional currency. Deepening is also the by-product of the work of the Commonwealth NGOs, which spread Commonwealth norms and values across the globe.

The early years of the modern Commonwealth are marked by a deepening of its values and institutions (ComSec to CMAG). This trend is still evident. One of the most notable developments running parallel/counter to globalisation is the rise of civil society. There is a plethora of Commonwealth NGOs, some of which pre-date the official Commonwealth. Incidentally, many of these have different membership criteria to the official Commonwealth. The existence and growth of these Commonwealth professional associations and NGOs is a clear indication that the process of deepening is intensifying. However, while many new organisations have emerged recently, a number of formerly well-established organisations have died (e.g. CTUC and the Commonwealth Institute).

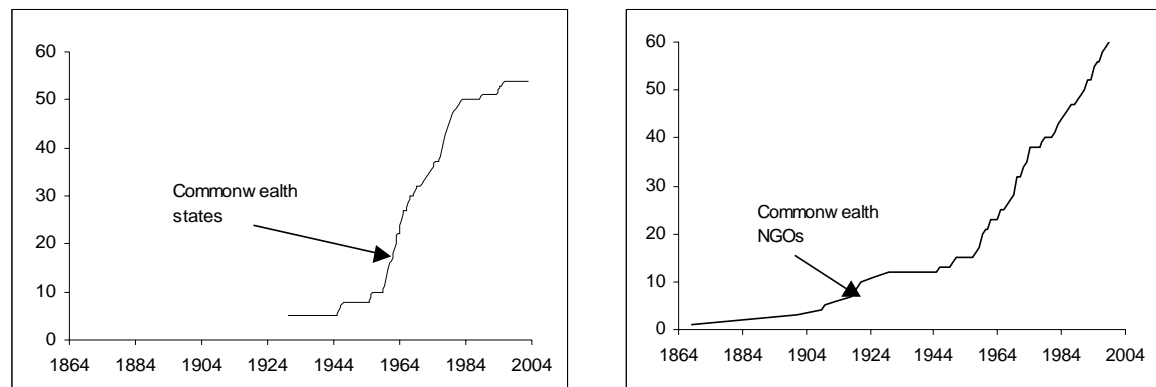
---

<sup>2</sup> The author is aware of rumours concerning a number of countries that may be interested in membership including the DRC, Algeria and Eritrea.

<sup>3</sup> Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Sudan and the UAE.

Since Coolum there has been more emphasis within the Commonwealth, on governance and CSOs involvement. Indeed there is now accreditation of NGOs to CHOGM and the Commonwealth Foundation has a Civil Society Advisory Council, who will also be meeting with foreign ministers in the fringes of CHOGM. The myriad of organisations that constitute the Commonwealth, are pondering how best to relate to each other. But do the benefits of widening limit the scope of deepening?

### Commonwealth state and non-state expansion 1868 onwards



Source: Auplat 2002 and te Velde-Ashworth 2005<sup>4</sup>

### Tensions

Globalisation has brought with it a blurring of borders and growing regionalism. As a result of the global changes that have taken place over the last decade, various tensions in the current membership criteria have become evident. If the Commonwealth is truly to be a rules based organisation as it purports, then these issues need to be addressed.

There are certain 'grey areas' in the membership criteria which are resulting in some tension. This is where the wording and interpretation of the membership criteria needs further clarification or review. Increasingly, there is also a shortcoming with regards to specific issues not covered by the membership criteria e.g. what is the time frame on the requirement for a 'constitutional link'? How might regional integration (e.g. EU constitution) affect this ruling? Why is there no mechanism for monitoring the public endorsement of membership? Should states be refused accession on grounds of the Harare Declaration when breaches within the association are not consistently dealt with by CMAG? Also, the "under review" solution is neither transparent, nor an example to other IOs of Commonwealth good governance.

When states join the Commonwealth, they automatically become members of the Commonwealth Secretariat, but not of the CFTC, the Commonwealth Foundation and the COL. Even though these organisations are central to the workings of the Commonwealth, members have to subscribe separately to them. Consequently various countries have not joined these organisations for reasons of finance and sometimes

<sup>4</sup> Auplat, Claire (2002) 'Commonwealth Civil Society after Coolum', CPSU seminar 18 June 2002 and Velde-Ashworth te Victoria (2005) 'Membership of the modern Commonwealths: Mozambique and beyond' PhD thesis

politics. This can lead to tensions where one branch of the Commonwealth is active in a particular country, but other parts of the association cannot support it.

The Commonwealth is in many ways a unique organisation. However, it also has certain characteristics in common with other IOs. The Commonwealth is often compared to La Francophonie, but in terms of membership criteria the two are quite different. Those of the Commonwealth are based on a common heritage while La Francophonie is open to any country. The former promotes good governance and human rights, while the latter promotes the French language. The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), admits states with significant Muslim populations, but like the Commonwealth, finds that politics sometimes gets in the way of the rules. India's<sup>5</sup> rejection is an example. The Commonwealth arguably has more in common with organisations like ASEAN and the ACP. Unlike the Commonwealth, debates on enlargement are familiar to the EU, where much public debate was held on the issue. Indeed existing member states held referenda on the accession of new members. The Commonwealth still has a very long way to go in terms of involving the public in the membership debate.

In the run-up to the Malta CHOGM there is still some tension over how best to engage with (Commonwealth) civil society. Also while advocacy NGOs demand growing attention, the Commonwealth professional associations tend to be overlooked. With increasing focus on the triad of business - civil society - government cooperation, these non-profit business organisations may yet play an important role in policy making and implementation.

### **Conclusions and options**

The issue of eligibility requires some nostalgic awareness of the past, but also a lot more optimism for the future. The Commonwealth does not have to choose between deepening and widening. Instead it needs to manage this dual process of evolution that started many decades ago. The following questions may help focus on the options ahead:

- Should there be a review of the membership criteria in order to clarify the 'grey areas'?
- Can a mechanism be established for testing public endorsement of Commonwealth accession?
- How should Commonwealth NGOs be more involved in the pre-accession planning ?
- Can ComSec provide unequivocal advice to accession countries on their timetable for accession and/or any conditionality?
- Should membership fee cover ComSec, CF, CFTC and COL, no opt-outs?
- How can the Commonwealth (state and non-state) capitalise more from globalisation and the rise of English as the lingua franca?

---

<sup>5</sup> India has the second largest number of Muslims in the world.