

“THE COMMONWEALTH”

CHOGM ROUND TABLE MEETING
MURDOCH UNIVERSITY
PERTH
FRIDAY 28 OCTOBER 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen it is a pleasure for me to be here today. I am grateful to the Round Table for the continuing interest it shows and promotes in the Commonwealth for the invitation to speak, and the Murdoch University for their hospitality.

Today in Perth, Prime Ministers and Presidents from 54 nations, representing almost a third of the world community, have been getting down to their first day of business.

It is clear that the Commonwealth has a life and impetus of its own, but whether it maximises the opportunities open to it, whether it does as much as it should to promote a better, more stable, more prosperous and more peaceful world, is open to question.

Let me not be misunderstood, I am one who believes in the Commonwealth, its possibilities and its future, but the Commonwealth is no more and no less than the people who make up its membership and the people who serve it. If the Commonwealth is to show vision and leadership for the future it will be because significant leaders of the Commonwealth believe in it and inspire it. It is a question of isolating important issues and asking how they can be resolved and then having the determination to pursue that solution with all the vigour and energy that is available within the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth as we know it began after the 2nd World War. It was in 1949 that 8 leaders in the Commonwealth took the decision to change the old Commonwealth irrevocably, to end the old imperialism, to banish the old empire and to help create a new future for new independent nations of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth depends upon people and in particular upon Heads of Government and in particular the Head of Government of the United Kingdom. While other Heads of Government have played a major role in Commonwealth affairs, it is the seriousness with which Britain treats the

Commonwealth and approaches its affairs, that gives it its strength and its capacity to overcome difficulty. In all the years in which I have been concerned in a public life and even afterwards, it is Her Majesty herself who has set a shining example. Her knowledge, her concern, the seriousness with which she takes the role of Head of the Commonwealth, are inspiring examples to us all.

Let me make one point about Britain. There have been important, often divisive debates in the United Kingdom about its role and relationship with Europe. How much should Britain be involved; initially should she join the common market, the answer to which was yes. Should she join the Euro, the answer was no and today Britain will be very glad that she is not part of that intractable problem. The important point to note is that Britain, within a vibrant and effective Commonwealth of Nations, has more influence in the world, to advance values that we all share, than would Britain alone.

So whether it is with the European community or in the wider world of the United Nations or the multitude of other forums which now exist, Britain with the Commonwealth, widely respected for its actions and for its principles, is more significant than Britain without the Commonwealth. That central element has not always been demonstrated or understood by British Prime Ministers or by British Governments. Indeed in some of the most visionary aspects of the Commonwealth, success was achieved not with Britain's leadership but rather against a background of British reluctance, or at best, acquiescence.

In this context, I was pleased to note that earlier this year, the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said that the Commonwealth was now "back at the very heart of British foreign policy".

Whatever the attitude of Britain, the Commonwealth has the capacity to have a world influence but it needs at its centre a Secretariat that is imaginative, that can understand the current problems and that has the energy and initiative to take effective action. Sir Shridath Ramphal, "Sonny" to all of us, was such a leader. He was prepared to push. He did not seek to antagonise, but he was not frightened of confronting Heads of Government if he had to, in pursuit of objectives, of purposes and principles of the Commonwealth.

There were two obvious examples in which, during Sonny Ramphal's time, the Commonwealth played a notable role. I speak of South Africa and Zimbabwe.

In regard to South Africa, Commonwealth countries overwhelmingly supported vigorous action. There were great arguments at the time and as often occurs when passions are aroused, the truth becomes blurred by falsities designed to support a particular argument.

I can remember people asking me, "why do you oppose apartheid when the ANC were branded as communists?" I actually had a CIA report, not the most left wing of organisations, which concluded that the ANC was a nationalist organisation fighting for equality amongst South Africans. But since it could not get support from the major countries of the West, it would get support wherever it could. That was only natural with the condition of South Africa at the time, but the CIA conclusion was clear, unequivocal and not hedged. The ANC is a nationalist organisation and is not communist. That report would have been available to many of those advancing the communist allegations, if they had wished to discover the facts.

The Commonwealth did play a responsible role in relation to South Africa. It was an activist one. It was pursued rationally and with reason. In relation to South Africa the financial sanctions put in place at the Commonwealth Conference in Nassau significantly, with the support of the then Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, helped influence the South African government to change. That meeting also decided to establish the Eminent Persons Group.

The Eminent Persons Group did not succeed in its task of bringing about a negotiation between the apartheid regime and the ANC in 1986. It did however, set out in clear terms the negotiating concept and the principles the South African government and the ANC would need to follow if there was to be a negotiated settlement.

It was clear apartheid could only be maintained by the application of force and violence. The Government therefore was going to have to end the state of emergency and take troops out of the townships. They were going to have to release Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners. They were going to have to lift the ban on the African National Congress and other political parties. If there were to be genuine negotiations both the

Government and the African National Congress were going to have to make a clear commitment to suspend violence.

There were many at the time who argued that the ANC should renounce violence. The Eminent Persons Group concluded however, that if the ANC did renounce violence it would be renouncing the only weapon that it had. It is a sad fact of human existence that violence can be used to pursue a legitimate ends. The most extreme example of that, of course, was violence in response to Nazism. The violence of Nazism could only be opposed and overcome by violence. If the weapons of apartheid were to continue, weapons that in nearly every facet involved violence, then violence was the only weapon available to the great majority of South Africans.

What was reasonable, however, was to say that the ANC must suspend violence while negotiations took place and that that suspension must be real and, once an agreement was reached, the suspension of violence would become a renunciation.

The principles underlining the negotiating concept were accepted by the ANC and the Afrikaner regime as realistic in the circumstances.

The work of the Eminent Persons Group underlined a dilemma. While the Government at the time wanted a negotiation, it wanted a negotiation that it could control.

The government of South Africa had believed its own propaganda. It had believed that the Africans were not one people, but an accumulation of rival and argumentative tribes who would not be able to develop a cohesive view. They believed therefore that with the support of one or two homeland leaders they could control a negotiation.

Wherever we went and whoever we met, we were told "*we support Mandela*". Why haven't you updated the freedom charter? "*We can't, we can't do it without Mandela*". Chief Buthelezi made it plain he would work with and under Mandela. So the government became aware through our discussions across South Africa that they would be dealing with a concerted negotiating group led by Nelson Mandela. They would not be able to control the outcome of such a negotiation, it would leave no reserve powers of privileged positions for the Afrikaners, it would establish a real democracy and they were not quite ready to accept that reality.

It was not too long afterwards through the leadership of President de Klerk that they came to understand that a properly negotiated solution, the birth of a democratic South Africa, was essential to the survival of them all. While Mandela played a central and pivotal role, much credit belongs also to President de Klerk who led the Afrikaners to believe and to accept the reality of the new South Africa.

Let me tell one story of Nelson Mandela. The first time I met him was in a guest house belonging at Pollsmoor jail. Nelson's first words to me were "*Mr Fraser, is Donald Bradman still alive?*" Later I took a bat signed "To Nelson Mandela, in recognition of a great unfinished innings, signed the Don". It was a delight to give it to the President and I am sure he has it still.

After the Eminent Persons Group had finished its immediate work, with President Obasanjo I visited the United States and had many meetings in Washington with members of the Administration and with major Congressional leaders. It is notable that President Reagan had vetoed a Sanctions Bill in relation to South Africa, but that Congress, Democratic and Republican alike, mustered the necessary majority to overturn the President's veto. The work of the Commonwealth, under the Eminent Persons Group, was at least in part responsible for that result.

None of that would have happened without Secretary General Shridath Ramphal.

The Commonwealth also, as you know, played a major role in helping to resolve the immediate problems of Rhodesia. By the end of the 1970's the conflict in Rhodesia had gone on and on and there was no resolution in sight. There was unending, continuing suffering and loss of life. Over three decades 27,000 people had been killed. The conflict had taken on the Cold War aspects. The international community seemed to have run out of steam. The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting at Lusaka in 1979 showed the way forward. This meeting led to later talks at Lancaster House, under United Kingdom management, which resulted in a solution and subsequent elections. These were regarded by all independent observers at the time, as free and fair, and for some years Zimbabwe seemed set on a stable future.

Unfortunately however, events deteriorated and President Mugabe became more and more dictatorial and corruption and brutality reigned. If this problem had been handled early and vigorously enough, as I believe it would have if Sonny Ramphal had still been around, the slide into chaos

might have been averted. I can remember talking with Olusegun Obasanjo about this problem. We both agreed that the only thing that could stand any real chance of changing President Mugabe's behaviour would be pressure from the southern African countries, particularly Nigeria and South Africa.

The Commonwealth meeting in Brisbane in 2002 decided that a mission should call upon President Mugabe to seek to change his ways. In retrospect, the Commonwealth in implementing its decision showed inadequate understanding of the dynamics of the problem. The mission was doomed to failure. The Secretariat had not given the lead, it had not provided the analysis necessary.

Robert Mugabe by that time and for a variety of reasons was almost beyond influence. There were two countries and two countries alone that could have achieved change, Nigeria and South Africa acting together and in concert. Indeed, President Obasanjo in many ways, founder of Nigerian democracy, twice organised meetings in Harare involving President Mbeki, President Mugabe and himself. Unfortunately, those meetings were abortive because President Mbeki went along with President Mugabe on issues of substance.

If South Africa then had given Nigeria full support, the countries of sub-Saharan Africa would have backed the initiative and success may have been achieved.

So while initially Zimbabwe was successful, it became increasingly unsuccessful and disastrous. It was a missed opportunity for the Commonwealth. It was a missed opportunity because at that time the Commonwealth did not have the personnel, the leadership, the determination and the courage to achieve the necessary change. It emphasises how much and how important the position of Secretary-General is to the continued efficacy of the Commonwealth.

There were other areas where the Commonwealth missed opportunities in recent years. It began regional meetings of the Commonwealth in the Pacific. First hosted by Australia, but then by others. The purpose was to provide a forum for the small Pacific Island States who were reluctant to say very much at the major meetings of the Commonwealth. Their agendas were different, their concerns were of a different order. Something was needed that embraced them, which would enable them to understand the full relevance, to them, of the Commonwealth. It also brought those Pacific

Island States, because of the membership of the regional meetings, into closer contact with states like Singapore, Malaysia and India.

Those regional meetings took some initiatives which assisted small island states. For example the Commonwealth established an office in New York so that the small island states of the Pacific could be kept in touch with what was happening at the United Nations, and would know when something of relevance to their affairs was occurring. A small step you might say, but to a country with no representation because it could not afford it, a significant one.

If those meetings had continued the Commonwealth could have been more successful than it has been with somewhat heavy handed actions in relation to the Solomons. Fiji might still be within the Commonwealth instead of on the outside as punishment.

One of the remarkable things about the Commonwealth is that no country has willingly wanted to leave it. Members of the Commonwealth have valued their membership, indeed, countries that were never part of the old British Empire have wanted to join. Mozambique and the Cameroon are now such members. I am also told that there are other countries that have indicated they would like to join. Undue expansion is not necessarily a good thing. One of the reasons for the Commonwealth's unity has been the common language. There has been no need for interpreters. If that were to break down it would tend to become too like the United Nations.

The United Nations does not provide the opportunity to establish close relationships with other Heads of Government or Heads of State as does the Commonwealth. It is these close relationships which are virtually unique to the Commonwealth and open to it the possibility of contributing effectively to solving problems that may arise.

It is important to understand that the Commonwealth and its effectiveness depends upon members and their belief in it. It is dependant upon the face to face knowledge of the Heads of Government and the Heads of State of the Commonwealth, on the opportunity to speak to each other openly and fearlessly. That has been not only by way of the bi-annual formal meetings of the Commonwealth, but also because a significant amount of time has been set aside for informal gatherings at the Commonwealth's retreat. These were meetings where Heads of Government and Heads of State met separately from their assistants and advisers. Then substantial

relationships were established that were of particular importance in enabling the Commonwealth to operate effectively.

This is why I have been saddened to see, through the pressure of modern day politics, that Heads of Government and Heads of State have shortened the time available for the retreats. If anything, once in every two years, even greater time should be spent in informal discussion.

In today's world the question of human rights influences many issues.

In 1991 the Commonwealth issued what became known as the Harare Declaration which set out a view of the Commonwealth, its purposes and the principles which its members should seek to follow. In many ways while it covered many aspects of the Commonwealth relationship, it covered significant elements defining human rights and the mechanisms necessary to maintain those rights.

Countries are at different stages of development and that has an influence on the way in which particular countries determine their own priorities. That is not always understood by western countries.

There are certainly many areas in which the Commonwealth not only needs to improve its own performance but where it can contribute to a better and much more secure world. We need to understand that even in the most advanced countries there are deficiencies, sometimes in the way minorities are treated, sometimes in the way poorer members of society do not have adequate healthcare or a reasonable opportunity to gain a good education. Human rights are not only a question of law and due process but cover the totality of government actions.

It is clear that the Commonwealth has taken substantive and effective actions in the past. It has had an influence. On some issues it has led the world. There is an opportunity for it to continue vigorous and far-reaching leadership which will not only advantage members of the Commonwealth but which could also set an example to other countries. Let me give some idea of what that future role may be.

We are all opposed to terrorism. Many countries have since 9/11 introduced quite draconian, anti-terrorist laws. The question here is to what extent should basic democratic principles be infringed.

It is my view that a number of countries have gone too far in prejudicing basic democratic rights in the fight against terrorism in the belief that there has to be a trade off between human rights and the effectiveness of the fight against terrorism. Derogations from our basic principles give at least a partial victory to the terrorist. We would be far better off if we could proclaim the virtue of our system, of our justice. At the end of the day, that is the most effective weapon against the tactics of terrorists.

Another mistake we make sometimes, and this is due to publicity since 9/11, is to believe that Islam is responsible for most of the world's terrorism. It is not Islam as a whole, but some fundamentalists who interpret the Koran in certain ways, ways which the prophet never intended.

We should also pay more attention to countries such as Indonesia which, despite some terrorist activities, has done a most praiseworthy job in maintaining the moderation and reasonableness and good neighbourliness of the overwhelming majority of Muslims within Indonesia.

Fighting terrorism is one area which has had an unfortunate impact on the rule of law and on due process under the law.

The way refugees are treated is another area in which the Commonwealth could contribute much. Because of war, strife, and internal discord, UNHCR refugee camps around the world have far too many people within their boundaries. In addition to that, there are millions more displaced within countries torn by civil war. A number of Commonwealth countries live very close to these problems.

In 1951 the United Nations adopted the Refugee Convention that established certain rights for refugees and certain obligations on all members of the international community who acceded to the Convention. The Refugee Convention emphasises that refugees often travel by unorthodox means and often without papers.

There is however a great deal of criticism about boats and people smuggling. We should not forget that many of those who fled Eastern Europe when it was under Soviet domination, or from parts of the Soviet Union itself in the early years after the war, had to pay for some part of their journey to get to a place of safety.

The Commonwealth again could play a role in examining the practices of different countries and their treatment of refugees. Either people displaced within a country or people fleeing from places of conflict. I know this, in part, could be replicating work done by the United Nations, but the Commonwealth could have a role in bringing light and knowledge to the debate, which is so often twisted for political purposes. Vigorous Commonwealth action in this area would lead to better and fairer treatment for refugees worldwide.

The Commonwealth could also spearhead an international movement through the United Nations to encourage recipient countries to take more refugees so that the numbers piling up in UNHCR camps could be very substantially reduced.

There needs to be transparency and greater clarity in how the performance of countries in relation to refugees and asylum seekers are compared. The official and unofficial intake should be dealt with as one so we can get a better idea of the effort made by different countries.

The Commonwealth could also spearhead more effective movements to try and resolve conflicts within a country or between countries, both of which give rise to the flow of refugees.

Many Commonwealth countries have indigenous minorities. The United Nations seeks to protect indigenous minorities through the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It defines the way in which countries should treat indigenous minorities and seek to assist them. The Commonwealth again, because of its special relationships, could supplement that role. The greatest weapon here would be exposure for those countries who fall behind and do not make adequate progress.

Another issue to which the Commonwealth could apply its knowledge and its experience would be greater advancement of women's issues. In some countries women have no legal or social equality; even in some countries where they do most of the manual labour. While traditional sensitivities need to be recognised and understood, there is much more the Commonwealth could do to advance women's equality. One of the simplest things, a better educated community is one of the most important elements that will enable that community to develop, to grow and improve living standards. The education of females, to higher standards, is absolutely critical to that process.

In respect of young people, it would be well within the means of the Commonwealth to establish youth exchanges. To establish a system of scholarships at different levels so members of the Commonwealth could study in other countries of the Commonwealth. While some may think this has particular relevance for wealthier members of the Commonwealth, we should not forget that whatever the wealth of a particular country, each member of the Commonwealth has some aspects from which others can learn with great advantage. So a system of youth exchanges properly financed broadly across the Commonwealth would do much to enhance its unity and its relevance.

A vigorous, active and transparent Commonwealth Secretariat, strongly led, could be more effective in addressing some of these issues, and in providing a lead to the world, than the United Nations itself.

Whether it is in the rule of law, the treatment of refugees, indigenous minorities or the status of women, we should have a strong independent body appointed to examine practices throughout the Commonwealth. A body that would not necessarily seek to apply one solution to all Commonwealth countries, because their circumstances and their capacities are so very different, but to publish reports each year which would give a clear and a factual view of the performance of all members of the Commonwealth. Such a review would need to take into account the history and culture of each country and the report card should be available to all members of the Commonwealth. Exposure and transparency could achieve much.

I applaud the work that has been undertaken by the current Eminent Persons Group into the future of the Commonwealth. I have seen a draft of its recommendations and I believe they make up a very significant set of proposals which would do much to enhance the relevance and influence of the Commonwealth. I hope not only that they will be adopted, but they be acted upon with foresight and vigour.

Let me emphasise one final point. It is possible to alter structures. It is possible to improve the operations of the Commonwealth Secretariat. It is important to have much better mechanisms to create transparency and openness in government, and that there be full disclosure of the actions of all members of the Commonwealth, judged against agreed and accepted Commonwealth principles and values.

Importantly, we need to understand that however good the Constitution, however effective the structures in theory, it is people who will make them work. The Secretary-General and his team, and the Heads of Government or the Heads of State themselves, all need to believe in the institution and its capacity to contribute greatly to a better world.

Government leaders need to be prepared to drive it and make it a significant part of their foreign policy and of their international cooperation. The Commonwealth is much more than a CHOGM every couple of years.

I firmly believe that the Commonwealth will contribute much, and in many ways, will take a positive lead in today's increasingly global world. Its effectiveness should be a central part of the foreign policy of each member country.

4297 words