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Future directions for the Commonwealth

Let me first of all say how glad I am to be here in Australia, particularly here in Melbourne, a vibrant and multicultural city that has clearly been engulfed with the excitement of the Games. Let me also congratulate you on the recent establishment of the Commonwealth Round Table in Australia (CRTA). The Round Table in the UK has played a prominent role in publicising the Commonwealth's work over the years: incredibly enough, it's coming up for its 100th birthday, and its journal is nothing short of definitive reading. I do congratulate Anthony Low for what he has done. The UK Round Table is a great success, and I know its Australian chapter will be, too.

I am, of course, happy to support your group and I am also delighted to be here to deliver your 2006 'Commonwealth Lecture'. This annual Lecture is already developing quite a profile, as I see I follow in the footsteps of Prime Minister John Howard, reviewing his period as Commonwealth Chairman-in-office, and Justice Michael Kirby, who I met with in London a fortnight ago. I trust this initiative will continue to help focus the minds of Australians on the challenges and opportunities currently facing the Commonwealth. I think that the Commonwealth's future is tied in many ways to Australia's own future, not least if one looks at the Pacific region, where Australia plays a key role.

Of course, Australia is a mainstay of our Commonwealth and always has been. Not only was it a founding member of the New Commonwealth that emerged from the 1949 London Declaration; it was also a pillar of the original Commonwealth structures that date all the way back to the 1870s. The Commonwealth and Australia have come of age together and throughout this long journey Australia has played a prominent role in its development. I look forward to it continuing to do so. If the Commonwealth can take pride in what it is today, it has countries like Australia to thank for it. If it wants a greater future it needs Australia's continuing support and commitment, and I'll come back to that later.

So in this lecture today I want to cover:

- What are we here for
- Unity – the diversity of the Commonwealth
- Democracy and Development
- Influencing of global issues
- Does Australia need the Commonwealth
- New directions for the Commonwealth
- Some conclusions

Which brings me back to the Games. We all remember the wonderful Olympic Games that were held in Sydney just a few years ago. From what I have seen I am sure that, given the healthy competition between Australia's two greatest cities, the Melbourne Commonwealth Games are going to leave a similarly big

I am sure that, given the healthy competition between Australia's two greatest cities, the Melbourne Commonwealth Games are going to leave a similarly big impression on all of us. Australia's success in hosting such major sporting events matches its athletes' success on the track, in the field and in the pool. Your investment in sporting infrastructure, both physical and human, has had the desired results. Here in Australia we have seen some of the best achievements that our men and women from all parts of the Commonwealth can attain, of course we all look at sporting events through the eyes of our own citizenship. I congratulate you on the high standards that you have set and consistently met. In a spirit of post-Commonwealth Games generosity, I urge you to help others within our Membership to achieve the same high standards in their endeavours too.

Unity in diversity: the Commonwealth standard

The issue of setting standards is of crucial importance to the Commonwealth as a whole, and here I am thinking of more than sport. At the Games here, you would not have a meaningful athletic contest without the standards inherent in the rules of the game as well as the measuring devices that assess the competition.

In the same way, I strongly believe that the Commonwealth is as effective as the benchmarks against which it measures itself. You can see there are two components to this: choosing good standards and then living up to them. Current Commonwealth measures are the products of its history but they also serve as gauges for its future.

What about that history – that shared history?

When I say we all speak the same language I don't mean English – I mean the common language of our institutions. Because we have enjoyed a common set of parliamentary, executive/cabinet and judicial systems, as well as accounting systems, customs systems, tax systems, education systems, and more. These have also enabled us to understand each other very well, just as a family's members might understand each other. Of course, like family members we can have our differences, but we also have it within us to resolve those differences for the greater good. And I believe that we have set an impressive record in this respect.

Our mixture of former British Dominions, Protectorates, Colonies and Trusteeships, coupled with five former German colonies, one former Portuguese colony, and seven of our members who are also members of La Francophonie, has become a truly global, multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-cultural, multi-national agglomeration of vastly-differing economies, societies and political realities; of equal member states. We have strength not only in our numbers but in our great diversity as well: 53 countries, 1.8 billion people, all the world's main religions, endless ethnicities, all the continents, from an enormous state like India, to tiny Tuvalu. You name it, our family has got it. We can make a lot of this if we choose to do so. We can use it for the benefit of the world.

In fact, historically, despite this great diversity, Commonwealth countries have acted together, and successfully, on major political issues like the overthrow of apartheid, the case for free and fair trade, and the fight against money laundering. Throughout, the strength of the Commonwealth has always lain firmly and squarely in its diversity but also in its unity. More, in its *inclusivity*: the Commonwealth would not be what it is without the very rich tapestry of civil society organisations – some 85 formally associated with it, and more besides – which promote people-to-people contact across the Commonwealth in myriad ways. The ‘People’s Forum’ in the margins of the Valletta meeting involved over 200 NGOs meeting both ministers and citizens. That will remain a leitmotif of the Commonwealth of the future.

This diversity, unity and inclusivity is becoming ever more apparent as a result of rising religious- and ethnic-oriented tensions across the world. Not only has the ongoing scourge of domestic and international terrorism intensified in many places; but whole societies are running the risk of a complete breakdown in communications within and between one another. Globalisation may very well be bringing us into much greater contact with other, widely differing societies, than ever before, and that may very well be giving rise to endless opportunity; however, it’s also exposing awful inequity, dire poverty, vulnerability and, particularly, exclusion.

Democracy and Development

Democracy is the bedrock of our Commonwealth; there can be no other way. In the last 15 years or so the membership has consolidated principles first elaborated in Singapore in 1971 into a wider-reaching statement of fundamental values in the form of the 1991 Harare Declaration. Values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, gender equality, just and honest government and sustainable development are the standards by which we all agreed to be judged.

In 1995, at Millbrook, our Leaders developed their own Action Programme to give the Harare Principles some teeth. They gave us the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, or CMAG, ready to act on any serious or persistent violation of the standards agreed in Harare. It has shown its effectiveness in the past, with Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Fiji Islands, Zimbabwe and Pakistan; it stands ready to show its effectiveness in the future as well, should that need suddenly present itself. The moral and political strength of this body of peer review stands witness to the Commonwealth’s unique role in solving some of the world’s most difficult and intractable political crises: without bloodshed, and, more importantly, in the interest of the people.

Each of our countries and their peoples have an inalienable right to a democracy of their own. However, at the same time they also have a fundamental right to economic development that can truly meet the basic and not-so-basic needs of their peoples.

It should be said up-front that the Commonwealth’s resources are miniscule when one glimpses the challenge we are up against. But looking at things in this way is to miss the point. The Commonwealth’s developmental role is not

about providing massive resources for the development of our countries' economies, just as its democracy role isn't about dishing out the massive resources that are needed to provide for the basic infrastructure of a democracy.

It's about adding value in each role – with the force of experience and the moral power of authority.

It's also about showing the links between the two pillars, Democracy and Development. Indeed, the Commonwealth carried out important work on this after the Heads of Government meeting in Coolum in 2002. Manmohan Singh, then in Opposition and now the Prime Minister of the largest democracy in the world, led a group of Commonwealth experts who worked on this. Their report put it like this: "development is about enabling people to have the 'capabilities' to do and be the things that they have reason to value". Development is about possibilities first, and production second. Mirroring that view of development, democracy too is about expanding opportunities and strengthening human capabilities. The Report made clear that – for development to happen – there has to be a core commitment to the central institutions of democracy. And those institutions are there to provide for the political freedom of the people. Democracy must promote liberty not deny it, just as development must promote and not deny economic freedom.

So the Commonwealth's real role lies in advocating and helping design and build those democratic institutions, providing technical assistance experts from all over the Commonwealth, as well as observing elections and working with other multinational organisations. Our help in fighting corruption is just as important as our help in reducing debt, providing appropriate aid, and making for greater economic opportunity through freer and fairer trade.

This fundamental focus on democracy and development rings right through all our work of recent years. It gives us clarity of vision, and guides our actions in a reliable way. We support civil society, not only for the causes it espouses and the good work it does, but also for its ability to check on government behaviour, and that of the opposition too, for that matter.

The Commonwealth has a large number of small states within its fold: 32 to be exact. It has taken a keen interest in their welfare; their special needs; their special weaknesses, vulnerabilities and concerns – in trade, for instance. Indeed, the Commonwealth has taken a lead in the field of advocacy of Small States' interests; in its dealings with the World Bank and with the wider international development community. It has a lot to show for its efforts: whether we are helping Tuvalu tell the world that it's sinking; or standing up for Caribbean banana and sugar access to the European Union; or drumming up support for Sri Lanka, and the Maldives after the Tsunami, or Grenada after Hurricane Ivan – the fact is, that we give time and voice to our small states, for theirs is not an easy lot.

The Commonwealth also pleads the case of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) among our midst; we cannot just sit by idly. Sit by today on the valid

developmental needs of these states and you will see what tomorrow brings: not only misery for them, but misery for all. Just as in the case of small states, and perhaps even more so, LDCs deserve special and differential treatment, in trade, for instance. Let us give them a chance to trade – why can they not benefit from their own comparative advantage (something the developed countries take for granted)? Let us give them the chance to earn their fair keep. We cannot keep shutting them out of the global economy: they have earned their right to be there: developed countries have no moral right to pull down shutters and close out those countries who helped them create their own high level of wealth over the last 75 years.

Leaders in Malta realised this; they made it clear they wanted a good Doha Round outcome in Hong Kong; they told their negotiators to get cracking. Okay: Hong Kong was not the blistering success it could have been; it should have been. Nevertheless, there was some progress made. And for this the Commonwealth should rightly take some credit: I can't underestimate the power of 53 countries, large and small, rich and poor, agreeing a trade position at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and then standing by that position in whatever regional or political blocs they subsequently find themselves in. India's Trade Minister Kamal Nath told me recently that the joint Commonwealth Statement from our Malta meeting has been, for him, a point of reference, his songsheet, you might say. We 53 Commonwealth countries stood up and we said: Give the developing countries of the world a chance: give them the means to succeed.

The Commonwealth has been arguing for a fair Doha deal for a long time, and we will continue to do so, with gusto, with passion. Because we believe it is the right thing to do; the right thing to be arguing for, even if it hurts the pockets of some of our richer members. Those same members have seen the wider picture, they have seen the light: it is up to others to do the same.

The Commonwealth over the last 15 years has seen many new instances of democracy take root; new multiparty democracies have emerged. Uganda was the most recent example of a transition to a multi-party system. To be sure, none of these emerging democracies are perfect; for that matter none of the so-called established democracies are perfect either. Democracy is an ongoing process, a journey not a destination – it's always a matter of debate and the need for improvement. We all need to do our very best to get things right: for the benefit of our peoples; for their future. These people deserve no less: 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' as Lincoln famously put it. And democracy needs rules about the proper interactions between civil society and government; between government and opposition; between the parliamentary, executive and judicial branches of the constitution; between the office-holders and the people. To engender responsibility, and accountability and respect. Respect for rights.

The Commonwealth has done its fair share in this field and it intends to do more in the future. The Latimer House principles codify for the first time the proper relationship between parliamentarians, ministers and judges; between the keyholders of a democratic state. The Commonwealth will also do more in

its discrete and successful Good Offices: to encourage statesmanship instead of politicking; global vision instead of petty politicking; to take the right decisions, with the benefits of our countries and our peoples clearly in mind.

Influencing global issues

The power of the Commonwealth is its moral basis. Equality, based on partnership: of peoples, however different, however distant in terms of geography. When we observe elections in Africa, we have distinguished Africans on our team, we have people from the Caribbean, from the Pacific and from Asia. The same Commonwealth mix applies for elections observed on other continents. They observe for themselves, how our governments are managing the transitions of change: to a better democracy: to a better future.

Besides being present here for the Games, last week I attended the Commonwealth Sports Ministers Meeting that is customarily held in the wings of such an event. In a similar way, our trade ministers meet around the major WTO ministerial sessions, our finance ministers around the World Bank and IMF annual meetings, our health ministers on the margins of the World Health Assembly and our foreign Ministers at the United Nations General Assembly. Of course, we have dedicated meetings of our own, but when we travel to the global meetings we are travelling together, with common ideas and proposals in our bags and in our heads, ready to do business with others. We often sit on the same plane going to these meetings. We have time to consider common approaches.

Australia and the Commonwealth

‘So why does Australia need the Commonwealth?’ That’s a question regularly put to me by journalists. Let me put it this way. Australia belongs to a number of organisations: the United Nations, the WTO, UNESCO, other UN bodies, APEC, ARF, and the Pacific Islands Forum to name a few. I’m sure the Foreign Minister and the Treasurer are asking themselves the question, at least once a year, as to whether the taxpayer gets value for money out of its membership of any those international organisations including the Commonwealth.

Through the Commonwealth, not only does Australia help support the promotion of democracy and good governance as far afield as Africa and the Caribbean, but also nearer to home in its own Asia/Pacific area. An Australian legal expert has been engaged by the Commonwealth to help Maldives in its reform process; we are working together to encourage the building of a sustainable democracy in Pakistan; the Commonwealth is assisting in the constitutional reform process in Tonga; and it has supported the building of democracy in the Solomon Islands and Fiji Islands. It will shortly be observing elections in both those countries.

So I would maintain that you do get value from your Commonwealth membership. We are not competing against any other organisation, but we do offer a more intimate forum than the UN, one in which Australia can influence the spread of democracy in fellow Commonwealth members with whom it may

not have close bilateral relationships, where it can build trade relationships or seek support for Australian initiatives in the UN or elsewhere. It also helps Australia understand the real demands of small states. The test is: does Australia make the most of its Commonwealth membership? Is it extending and deepening its own external relationships through being part of the Commonwealth? I believe it is.

New directions

In the Commonwealth, we take our cues from our biennial Heads of Government Meetings. We last had one here in Australia, in Coolumberr, in 2002. The most recent one was held in Malta, last November. It was a good one. We of course reaffirmed our commitment to democracy and development. However, in addition to that we tasked ourselves with several new mandates, four of which require special mention.

Most important perhaps, given the alarming backdrop of increasing global misunderstanding and intolerance, brought into sharp relief not least by the Danish cartoons incident, was the call by our Leaders for the Commonwealth to put its comparative advantage in the field of diversity to greater use, in an effort to stop us and others sliding down the slippery slope of mutual incomprehension and prejudice.

Of course, the Commonwealth has a good record here, with excellent examples of successful management of national and international diversity; experience it can use to promote inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogue and make practical improvements within our member states, within our Organisation as a whole and indeed within the world at large. We will, of course, not seek to duplicate what others in the international community are doing in this important field and work together with others on this.

In an effort to document best practice and experience of mutual respect and understanding, I will be convening a group of eminent persons from various walks of life from around the Commonwealth in the coming months, to see what they have to advise on the matter. We will be holding workshops, colloquia and other deliberations, also involving the Commonwealth's youth to the greatest extent possible, to find a practical way ahead towards building more harmonious societies.

The Commonwealth is not only in the business of bridging political and social divides. In Valletta it was also tasked with contributing to bridging the so-called 'digital divide' of the technological haves and have nots, which has the potential to become a new iron curtain if we allow it to do so. That work got under way just a fortnight ago, when a Steering Committee met for the first time to take forward a Commonwealth Action Plan on the Digital Divide, with a special fund to support the exercise which has already benefited from over £700,000 in government contributions, the bulk of it from India.

I have already told you that the Commonwealth has restated its commitment to bridging the economic divide, by pushing as far and as hard as we can for free and fair trade for all, and ensuring that the Doha Round delivers a genuine development dividend.

And we don't divide or separate ourselves from those outside. In Valletta, Heads of Government also made it clear that despite the Commonwealth already having within it all types of peoples, races and states from every corner of the planet, they called for a review of the criteria for Commonwealth membership, displaying a general sense of openness to interest from aspiring members. Interest in the Commonwealth can only be a good thing. At the same time I sense strongly that the values and principles of the Commonwealth remain the non-negotiable benchmarks for membership.

Conclusion

In the thick of all this sporty excitement that has descended upon us here in Melbourne, particularly after last week's fantastic Opening Ceremony and the sporting events that have since taken place here, one might be forgiven for thinking that the Games are what the Commonwealth is all about. Certainly, many people know of the Commonwealth purely by reason of the Games. That's not a bad thing. We can put this to good use, to build upon the awareness, to tell people what the Commonwealth is really about. We can advertise the nature of our association. And its merits.

It is well known that the Greeks were the creators of the Olympic Games. To the best of my knowledge they were also the creators of democracy. Of course, both the Games and the idea and reality of democracy have moved on, but I would say that the excitement inherent in both is still there.

Athletes compete, political parties compete, Commonwealth members even compete. But they do so within an over-arching faith in, and commitment to, the common system of the Games, the common system of democracy, the common system of international relations. Our common wealth is our common belief in our common systems.

I have come here today to talk to you about the future: the Commonwealth's future; your future; your children's future. Standing back awhile we can see quite clearly that our organisation's continued success, like that of any generation, hangs with the younger generation. They are the ones who hold the key, here in Australia, as elsewhere in our body: in Malaysia, in the Bahamas, in Nigeria, wherever. You get the odd old athlete of course, like me, but in the main our younger sportsmen are showing us the extent of the field, the extent of the success they can register there. Likewise, in our continuing search for sustainable democracy and development, we must equally turn to our Youth. To them we hand the torch of hope; to them we turn for guarantee. We teach them our best and wait to see what they can achieve.

If I have a message for you today it is to reach out to the younger people; teach them what is great about our Organisation; what one of your journalists said recently "an anachronism that works", show them what is great about our Commonwealth; about our future; about their future. I have confidence in our mission and in its continued success – across the 53 countries of the Commonwealth, and that of course means right here in Australia.

Thank you.