

**Discussion document for pre-meeting to Round Table Commonwealth and Democracy conference, 23-25 June 2010, to consider the establishment of a Commonwealth Democracy Network for interested scholars, 3-5pm, Tuesday 22 June 2010, Room 104, London University Senate House.**

**Moderator: Professor Philip Murphy, Director, Institute of Commonwealth Studies**

**Rapporteur: Dr Melanie Torrent (Paris Diderot)**

This is an options paper, on which invited speakers will be asked to comment at the launch of the discussion. It outlines: potential purposes; topics that persons joining such a network might wish to pursue; organisation ( including IT ); relations with other bodies or networks; funding; and other matters.

### 1 Potential purposes

The idea for a Commonwealth Democracy Network starts from the key commitment of the Commonwealth, most recently reaffirmed by leaders of its 54 states at Port of Spain in November 2009, that its peoples have the right to practise democracy. This commitment is underpinned by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, set up in 1995, and the work of many Commonwealth bodies. At the same time there are significant numbers of academics, working in faculties of politics, international relations, development studies and elsewhere, who are researching the theory and practice of democracy in one or more Commonwealth countries. The centenary of the Round Table journal in 2010, and its London conference on Commonwealth and Democracy, could catalyse the creation of a network of scholars interested in these issues. Its purposes could include: the exchange of general research and other information; contact-building for scholars with highly specific interests; collaboration with regard to research, conferences, or contributions to journals; creation of funding applications; joint access to sources of information; and recruitment.

### 2 Topics

It is likely that topics of concern to members of such a network will vary according to the vantage-point occupied – for example, according to which Commonwealth country the member is living in, and his or her disciplinary background, or research interest. The list of possible topics is long, but could include: concepts of democracy, and their evolution; the environment of democracy ( media, civil society, judiciary, security systems etc ); political parties; gender and democracy; participation rates; rotation of governments; administration; local democracy, and devolution; democracy, and social class or caste; finance and corruption; democracy and development; elections, electoral systems and election observance; youth; presidentialism, parliamentarism and mixtures of the two; constitutions and constitutional change; “unity” and “power-sharing” governments; democracy and supra-nationalism; identity and religious politics; unicameral or bicameral systems; democracy as perceived in certain regions ( ie South Asia or West Africa ) or grouped by the Westminster tradition; federal systems ( eg Malaysia, Canada ); literacy, education and democracy; democratic empowerment outside elections.....A network does not need to focus on any particular themes, but it is possible that its most active members will share some driving, shared concern at the start.

### 3 Organisation

There are several formats for operating a network successfully in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and participants in the consultation on 22 June will share their own experience. Effective use of information technology, and an eye to the sustainability of any approach adopted, are crucial. The simplest network is an email list, to which interested people add their names; more ambitious networks rely on a website, backed up by an individual or group, sometimes paid to manage it. A network is not a new body or NGO, and should be easy to access at no cost, especially bearing in mind the economic difficulties in developing countries, and problems faced by younger scholars everywhere. However it is possible that its utility will be promoted by a group of colleagues from a single institution, or friends from a small number of institutions who wish to keep in touch. However several networks of friends, set up after they met at a conference, have failed to last.

### 4 Relations with others

A key decision for the consultation on 22 June will be to decide whether there is a case for a scholarly network focused on democracy issues in the Commonwealth, which is needed and does not duplicate anything in existence. If this is accepted, and there is enthusiasm to build such a network, it will not be difficult to establish friendly relations and web links with other bodies. In London alone many Commonwealth bodies have websites, going beyond the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The Institute of Commonwealth Studies and Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit have active websites and email lists; the Royal Commonwealth Society has just completed its "Commonwealth Conversation"; the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan has governance and other networks; the Westminster Foundation for Democracy has established the Westminster Consortium for Parliaments and Democracy; the Round Table journal itself has an archive of relevant articles. Throughout the Commonwealth at large there are many academic institutions and think-tanks which share a concern for democracy, with their own insights.

### 5 Funding

It is not clear whether a network of the simpler kind will require any specific funding, and the Round Table journal is not in a position to provide starter finance. Participants on 22 June, with their own experience of other networks, will be in a position to advise what may be needed against a consensus on purposes and modalities. If some finance is thought necessary, then a group of scholars or an interested institution will need to make suitable applications against a budget estimate.

### 6 Other matters

The network being considered is one for scholars and those based in academic and similar institutions. However there may be a wider range of people, including political practitioners and those from the media, who would like to join. Would this be a good idea? There is also an issue of locus; the proposal is being discussed in London, but the Commonwealth is a world-wide association. How easy will it be for scholars and others around the globe to participate and have a sense of ownership? There is also an issue of the age of participants. A network too reliant on senior researchers may not have much staying power, or attraction for younger people. Is it possible to

start it with a cross-section? Will there be a gender balance? A report of the Senate House consultation will go up on the Round Table centenary website, but what will be the follow-up? Depending on the discussions on 22 June, and if there is a core of interest, it may be possible to launch the network before the conference concludes on 25 June 2010.

*Richard Bourne and Amelia Hadfield, Co-organisers, Round Table centenary conference on the Commonwealth and Democracy*