



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

A View to CHOGM

Monday 6th July 2015

Convened by the Royal Commonwealth Society

Hosted by the High Commission for Cyprus in the UK

Speakers

Mr Michael Lake CBE, Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society (Chair)

Mr David Concar, UK Envoy to the Commonwealth of Nations

Ms Francesca Danmole, 2013 UK candidate for Chair of the Commonwealth Youth Council

The Rt. Hon. Lord Howell of Guildford, President of the Royal Commonwealth Society

Ms Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba, candidate for the Commonwealth Secretary General post

The Rt. Hon. The Baroness Scotland of Asthal QC, candidate for the Commonwealth Secretary General post

Note: All declared candidates for Commonwealth Secretary General at the time of the event were invited but some were unable to attend due to other commitments.

The discussion was opened by HE Euripides Evriviades who said that the Commonwealth had been a force for good over the years. He expressed his certainty that Malta would deliver a successful Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and praised the audience for showing their commitment to the Commonwealth by attending the discussion.

Chair, Michael Lake, mentioned that the Commonwealth, despite its obvious strengths, was in need of some revitalisation. He too expressed support for the Prime Minister of Malta, Dr Joseph Muscat, in his declared aspirations for CHOGM. He concluded his introduction by saying that, given the numerous challenges the world was facing, it was an important time for the Commonwealth and for its future health.

What follows is a non-attributed summary of the discussion held under 'Chatham House Rules'.

The panellists began by giving a short summary of their perspectives on the Commonwealth, the issues that they saw as having priority and their expectations for CHOGM.



External challenges

There was much agreement over the capacity and potential of the Commonwealth as well as the number of challenges, both internal to the Commonwealth and external, that it faced. It was felt that the Commonwealth sat within a world in some turmoil. One panellist mentioned that the world was facing an 'arc of conflict' stretching from North Africa to Eastern Ukraine, saying that new forms of conflict were emerging across this space and countries were increasingly concerned by the threat of radicalisation and social unrest.

In addition to conflict-related issues, climate change was discussed as a threat to the whole of the Commonwealth. In particular, small island and developing states were particularly at risk from the effects of climate change including food insecurity and rising sea-levels. Related to environmental issues was the challenge of sustainable resource usage, crucial for maintaining long-term development.

Finally, the rights of women and girls was raised by one audience member and the panel agreed that this was a crucial issue for the Commonwealth and globally. One panellist mentioned that without meaningful gender equality, economic development for all would be curtailed. Another panellist described the success of the UK's progress on domestic violence and suggested that this could easily be replicated across the Commonwealth.

Internal challenges

The external challenges faced by Commonwealth nations were ones that called for both international co-operation and soft power diplomacy. The Commonwealth was seen as an ideal network to address these issues, if its leaders chose to do so.

The question was raised about the effectiveness with which the Commonwealth nations were working together, whether they were taking a unified approach and whether they were working to bridge the divide between the 'global north' and the 'global south', or exacerbating it. One panellist asked whether all governments were contributing financially and morally to the Commonwealth. Another panellist placed the emphasis on the potential for co-operation and shared experience, giving the examples of Rwanda's success on health and Kenya's on digital and telephone banking, as cases to learn from.

Another key internal challenge, raised by an audience member, was the declining turnout by Heads of Government at CHOGM. This was seconded by another audience member who asked why small states should go when large states did not, and at a time when leaders failed to devote time to meet and debate in private. Most panellists placed the emphasis on ensuring that the agenda for CHOGM was something that all states saw as relevant. Opportunities for development and trade were also listed as agendas that were not being addressed with energy and effectiveness. Overall it was argued that more should be done to make Commonwealth leaders understand how they were



interconnected and how CHOGM provided an opportunity to address common challenges and opportunities. There was a strongly held view that the appointment of a new Secretary General, who could bring leadership and profile to the role, was crucial to the well-being of the Commonwealth.

A High Commissioner reflected on how CHOGM had lost its way and suggested that it might become redundant. Panellists felt that the meeting of leaders had relevance if it resulted in the development of personal relationships between them and in simple and well-articulated policies on which they would collaborate. It was felt that this was not the state.

Core strengths

Panellists responded to questions asking about the strengths and areas of the Commonwealth's work which they would continue to support.

The Commonwealth's work to assist and represent its small island and developing states was seen as a huge success and a somewhat unique strength compared to other international organisations. Its work on youth participation was also seen as, not only a strength, but an area in which the Commonwealth was ahead of other international organisations. Both areas were seen as policy areas worth 'incubating'.

Finally a core Commonwealth strength related to the way in which the network worked. One panellist emphasised that the Commonwealth was the only network where small, medium and large states could meet and co-operate together. It was a network where the flexibility of small states could be combined with the resources of large ones. Other panellists also emphasised the opportunities to embrace diversity and understand global interconnectivity. While there were obvious challenges ahead for the Commonwealth, it was still seen by all participants as a global opportunity to foster co-operation. The potential for like-minded countries to co-operate on matters of security was mentioned as an under-exploited strength.

The Chairman thanked the audience and the panellists for a wide-ranging exposure of challenges and opportunities. It was clear, he said, that there was a genuine sense of value in the association, its relevance for all members and the strength of its networks. Equally, there was a sense of frustration about its apparent inability to optimise its inherent benefits.

With regard to CHOGM, there was an evident appetite for change, for modernisation and for a renewed enthusiasm on the part of the leaders to attend and to benefit from meeting their fellows. The new Secretary General would face a tenure of great potential and one demanding significant change in terms of governance and effectiveness.

The Royal Commonwealth Society wishes to thank all the panellists and audience members who participated in the discussion and our hosts the Cypriot High Commission.