

Royal Commonwealth Society Roundtable Discussion

Part Three

Governance of the Commonwealth

Report 2015



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

About this Report

This report summarises the third in a series of roundtable discussions. It took place on 26th March 2015 and was organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society and hosted by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It was chaired by the Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society, Michael Lake CBE. The discussion sought to address how the Commonwealth can be more effectively governed. The discussion was attended by a select group of leaders from diplomacy, academia, journalism and Commonwealth organisations, representing diverse facets of the Commonwealth. The meeting was held under Chatham House Rule in order to ensure a frank and honest debate, and this report provides a non-attributed overview of the discussion.

The Commonwealth - A global contribution at a time of change

The Chair began the discussion by outlining some of the opportunities for a Commonwealth contribution to global discussions this year. The Commonwealth has already adopted a statement on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which calls for, 'an ambitious and collaborative spirit to achieve a concise, compelling and balanced post-2015 Development Agenda'. The United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September is due to discuss 'a transformative agenda for people and planet'. There is a question over whether a sense of Commonwealth energy can be brought to these deliberations. The 50th anniversary of the Commonwealth Secretariat allows a chance to reflect on how the Commonwealth is governed. There is a sense that more can be done to effectively manage and promote the Commonwealth's twin agendas of shared values and prosperity. To underline the importance of the governance debate the Chair quoted the next Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth, Maltese Prime Minister Dr Joseph Muscat who argued in a recent Commonwealth speech that, "What is for sure is that change does not happen by itself or by accident. We need to work for change. Staring at a decaying organisation and hoping that its fortunes might suddenly turn around is delusional".

Many of the participants agreed that the Commonwealth sat in an era of global change. As new trade patterns, movements of people and regional alliances shift there is a need to maintain or renew global connections. The digital revolution allows huge new possibilities for forging such connections as communication becomes instant and the transfer of information increasingly accessible. One participant alluded to the famous 'Winds of Change' speech by Harold Macmillan, seeing a future where everyone has equal voice, yet with their differences, where the purpose is to foster dialogue and support contact between peoples.

Against this dynamic of shifting international relations several participants believed the Commonwealth was a network well placed to deliver global benefit. Some noted its track record in promoting Westminster democracy and strengthening judiciaries in its member states. The Commonwealth's civil society was also praised for its work. Others believed it was well placed to contribute to new discussions such as security or react to future needs arising in the next five to ten years. The challenge for how the Commonwealth is run is to ensure that debates on governance catch up with the scale and speed of change in the global arena. With the current Secretary General

due to finish his term in 2016, the next leader of the next Commonwealth will need to ensure that the values, prosperity and governance agendas are taken forward.

Value to Members

One of the biggest changes mentioned, that affects national political perceptions of the Commonwealth, was the rise of regional organisations. One attendee from Africa suggested that the Commonwealth was seen as less important on the continent since the rise of the African Union. Others commented that the Commonwealth competed for influence with organisations such as the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) and the European Union. However, this view was not universally held with one person suggesting that the Commonwealth was not comparable as a unique global network.

It was acknowledged that currently the Commonwealth Secretariat has a very broad array of activities which it undertakes with a staff of around 275 and an annual budget of only £45million, far smaller than the overseas aid budgets of several of its members. However, participants in the discussion believed that the Commonwealth can continue to be the 'go to place' for advice on governance issues such as democracy, rule of law or corruption. It also is well placed to reconcile any perceived incompatibilities between the values and prosperity agendas. These suggestions helped to address the complaint raised that in structures such as the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group there is a feeling that the Commonwealth is there to be punitive rather than helpful.

Communicating the Vision of the Commonwealth

As has been raised in many discussions on the Commonwealth, it was acknowledged that the Commonwealth has to do more to be visible. One participant articulated that the public in several countries had an enduring level of support for the Commonwealth due to its association to the Head of the Commonwealth, Her Majesty The Queen. However, they suggested that the foreign policy elite in these same countries did not see the need for, or usefulness of, the Commonwealth. Journalists also rarely cover the Commonwealth. While interest spikes around the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs) editors will not spend money to send journalists to them because the processes are seen as obscure and no single story emerges from these summits.

To address this lack of visibility it was suggested that the Commonwealth Secretariat can do more to articulate how the Commonwealth is used by governments already. For example, one person suggested that the Secretariat could disaggregate how much countries such as Australia, Canada and the UK spend on Commonwealth countries compared to non-Commonwealth countries in overseas aid or articulate the total Commonwealth contribution by members to members in times of crisis. For example, the total Commonwealth effort to assist Sierra Leone with Ebola was significant yet this is often presented from each member's perspective rather than also from a total Commonwealth perspective.

More fundamental changes were also suggested to the Commonwealth to allow it to connect more directly with people. First, it was argued that young people should be encouraged to take a bigger role in the Commonwealth. In return for being consulted on Commonwealth issues, young people are able to take forward Commonwealth messages through their digital networks. Secondly, it was suggested that the Commonwealth must establish more of a physical organisational presence outside of London. The Commonwealth could establish regional hubs to allow for greater interaction with the regions. While some argued that the Commonwealth needs a central focal point instead of regional hubs, others noted the existence of global offices and branches of organisations such as the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and Royal Commonwealth Society which could form the basis of a bigger regional presence. Thirdly, a key suggestion was an increased role for civil society in Commonwealth decision making. In particular it was suggested that the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation could do more to become an enabler for civil society.

The role of the Secretary-General

The issue that dominated the discussion on governance in the Commonwealth was the role and selection of a new Secretary-General. With such pressing challenges facing the Commonwealth all discussion participants stressed the importance of the selection of the next Secretary-General, which will take place at CHOGM in November 2015.

The established process for the selection of the Secretary-General allows any Commonwealth Member State to suggest a candidate until the day the CHOGM commences. All countries then participate in a straw poll with consensus being sought to nominate a candidate as the next Secretary-General. While it is understood that this year Malta is hoping for consensus to be formed before Heads of Government convene, with perhaps only two candidates left in the running by CHOGM, one participant asserted that Commonwealth Member States will cling to their right to nominate at any point before CHOGM, and that usually up to three or four candidates are still in the running by this point. In addition, it was asserted that any notions that the Secretary-General should be determined by regional rotation are misplaced. Moreover, it was clarified that nominees do not need the official endorsement of regional groupings, helpful though this may be to candidate, but just need to be nominated by a Member State.

For some the process is nowhere near as important as the outcome. It was argued that compared to the Commonwealth, the Francophonie had attracted a higher-profile pool of Secretary-Generals, including one former UN Secretary-General, one former President and one Governor-General. For the Commonwealth it was suggested that Heads of Government could be convened before CHOGM to take a view on the next Secretary-General, however, it was noted that the next opportunity around the UN General Assembly was at too late a stage. Any perceived changes to the process of selecting a candidate would also need pan-Commonwealth support.

The desire for a strong Secretary-General has led to the suggestion of convening a committee to establish the criteria and desired attributes for the post. Such a committee should have representation from all five regions and could be chaired by Malta, as the next Chair-in-Office and host of CHOGM. After delivering its recommendations, this committee would potentially be in a

position to approach possible candidates, with the aim of encouraging high-profile statespersons to put themselves forward.

While the idea of a steering committee was well received it is ultimately Heads of Government who have the responsibility of choosing the Secretary-General. This search is crucially important for the Commonwealth and it should be under discussion in all capital cities. It was argued that at this time of global change, the next Secretary-General (and all aspiring candidates) should be articulating their own vision for the Commonwealth. Ultimately, as the Chair concluded, the Secretary-General should be someone who ‘takes people’s breath away’ and proactively leads the Commonwealth on the global stage.