

Survival of the Commonwealth?

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If the Commonwealth is to survive, Heads of Government are going to have to take the organisation seriously and live by the principles it espouses. Basic statements on human rights, on the way government should behave are fine. They are expressions of noble sentiments, but when it comes to a test, the Commonwealth fails.

It used not to be that way. Heads of Government used to attend, they used to move into a retreat and get to know each other and trust each other. The Commonwealth was more influential than any other organisation in ending apartheid. While the result became highly controversial, it also played a significant role in Zimbabwe. People forget that the final outcome there was negotiated by the British at Lancaster House.

In Perth, two years ago, the Commonwealth had before it a report calling for urgent reform. The Commonwealth has gone backwards since that point. Instead of fighting for human rights, it has played a role in damaging human rights.

It determined that the next meeting should be held in Sri Lanka. A number of international reports have called for a full and official enquiry into war crimes, almost certainly committed both by government forces and by the Tamils. At this last meeting in Sri Lanka, only 26 Heads of Government attended. Canada stood by its principles, the Canadian Prime Minister refused to attend. The Australian Government refused to criticise Sri Lanka, believing that its cooperation was necessary in stemming the flow of refugees to Australia. What would stem the flow are changes in the attitude of the Sri Lankan Government so that there would be no need to flee the terror, Government policy still inflicts in the minds and hearts of many Sri Lankans.

The Commonwealth has failed to take a responsible position. It has failed to live by its principles. It has failed to understand that ethics is a significant part of good governance. How long can such an organisation survive? Above all, the Commonwealth needs a core of states committed to its purpose, committed to its functions and committed to ethical government.

Britain is in the strongest position to play a role. Britain could give a lead, but it is many decades now since the British believed that the Commonwealth was important to it. Britain, at the centre of a powerful and cohesive Commonwealth, is much more significant in world affairs than Britain standing alone. British Governments seem not to have understood this.

If there is to be a significant Commonwealth, the Secretariat above all, must be rejuvenated, given greater authority and leaders must be chosen for that Secretariat, who will, if necessary, drive the Commonwealth to achieve its own stated purposes. The Commonwealth would not have been an active force in relation to South Africa if Sir Shridath Ramphal had not been Secretary-General. He drove the issue. He annoyed some Heads of Government, who wished he and the Commonwealth would just be quiet,

but he believed that the Commonwealth should actively pursue its principles and he was right.

Since then, Britain in particular, and other Commonwealth leaders have not wanted a Secretary-General and a Commonwealth Secretariat that would press issues firmly, who would badger governments till they acted and that would achieve something of note.

All through the South African issue, Prime Minister Thatcher regarded the Commonwealth as a nuisance. It was a nuisance because it was active. When she and President Reagan were calling the ANC communists and terrorists, most members of the Commonwealth believed that they were nationalists fighting for equality. I actually had a CIA report in the middle 1980's which made that point very clearly. They got support from communist countries because they could not get support from people, who may more traditionally have provided support.

It is worth noting in relation to sanctions against South Africa, that the United States passed legislation supporting sanctions. President Reagan vetoed the legislation. The Commonwealth had been active in lobbying the United States Congress. Members, both democrat and republican, supported actions of the Commonwealth and opposed the Presidential veto. It is one of the rare occasions in which Congress mustered the numbers to override that veto. That would not have happened had it not been for the lobbying of the Commonwealth itself.

Numbers tell the story of the Commonwealth of recent years quite clearly. Out of 54 members, only 30 attended in Perth and in Colombo, only 26 attended. How many of those stayed away because they did not want to give credibility to a country which widely believed to have committed significant war crimes.

If the Commonwealth is to exercise influence in the future, Commonwealth governments need to rebuild the Secretariat so that it becomes an active force that will pursue the stated principles of the Commonwealth, and that will chivvy, if necessary, drive governments to support those principles. The Commonwealth's current quiescence derives quite directly from the fact that Sonny Ramphal's activist period annoyed a number of governments. Governments did not want advice on what they ought to do. Increasingly in today's world, a number of governments need the kind of advice that the Commonwealth would be able to offer.

Whether the meeting in Malta in 2015 will make any difference, whether Britain will seize the opportunity for leadership, is open to doubt. Of all countries now, Britain or Canada, are the two who might provide that leadership to rejuvenate this organisation. Something of real value will be lost if they do not take that opportunity.

The theme for the Commonwealth this year is Team Commonwealth: Transcending the Horizons. It has been adopted apparently to focus on the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in July. It emphasises that the Commonwealth works best when it pulls

together, but it needs drive, it needs energy, it needs courage and it needs to live by its stated principles.

Commonwealth governments have the capacity to establish such an organisation. They could make the Commonwealth an active instrument for the advancement of mankind. The Secretariat has reflected the wishes of governments and its governments that need to change.

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