

A Conversation Starter

THE COMMONWEALTH @ 60: ASSESSING ITS SUCCESS AND VALUE

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What constitutes success or failure for an international intergovernmental organisation (IGO)? How do we properly judge the performance of international institutions generally and the Commonwealth specifically?

The notion of success in the practice of foreign affairs is regarded, politically and academically, as generally indeterminate and therefore difficult. A foreign policy success under one government is often seen as a failure by its successor. In the multilateral sphere it becomes even more difficult with competing interests of numerous governments at stake.

An IGO can be assessed as performing well (or badly) on the basis of two factors: *functionality*, how it performs in fulfilling its prescribed mandate(s); and *outcomes*, its results, actions, consequences, the value of its products. Functionality refers to the integrity and fidelity with which these mandated functions are performed. Outcomes can be favourable or unfavourable, comparatively good or bad, incremental and tentative or substantial and final.

So how is the Commonwealth to be judged? How are we to evaluate it according to the twin elements of functional integrity and lasting productive outcomes?

As to functional integrity, the modern Commonwealth has no charter, no treaty, no agreed MOU. Its only prescribed 'mandate' is in the London Declaration of 1949 positing it among the post WWII proliferation of international agencies as an association of equal states, united and "freely cooperating in the pursuit of peace, liberty and progress". In other words, its 'mandate' is to work for the peaceful resolution of conflict, democratic governance and the rule of law, sustainable economic and social development.

The best indicator of the Commonwealth adhering to its mandated functions is that its relevance to the aspirations of its members appears undiminished.

Yet, strangely enough, some serious threats to the Commonwealth's effective future come from its member states.

There are several issues here. First, member governments perpetuate outdated and uneven budgetary arrangements, largely unchanged in 60 years and dependent on the ongoing generosity of the British. Funding both in form and quantum has not kept pace with the evolution of the organisation itself and its vastly expanded work programme. Key members, developed and developing alike (Australia, NZ, Canada, India, Nigeria, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore), need to accept greater responsibility in providing their fair share of funding.

Second, and related, is the relatively recent emphasis by governments, especially the powerful ABC donor countries - Australia, Britain, Canada - on organisational efficiencies and constant reviews of the Secretariat, resulting in skewed priorities and the diversion of scarce resources away from operations in the field.

Third, the Commonwealth needs robust leadership from individuals and governments within its ranks. This includes a progressive, imaginative and bold Secretariat, sometimes adventurous in the spirit of Ramphal. The Secretariat constantly needs to lift its performance and maintain a keen sense of focus if it wants to attract more funding. But leadership is also needed from among heads of government and ministers who understand the value and utility of Commonwealth diplomacy and are prepared to use it, as it was with leaders like Trudeau, Fraser, Lee Kwan Yew and Manley,

As to performance and outcomes, the Commonwealth's record is mixed but mainly positive. That it exercised a major positive role in southern Africa (South Africa and Zimbabwe) in the 1980s is undisputed. Similarly, its contribution more recently has been formidable – especially in support of democratic institutions, good offices, parliamentary building and election observation (Maldives, Uganda, Tonga, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zanzibar, Guyana are all good examples). Its continuing leadership on small states and its intellectual and political contribution to world economic and trade initiatives are widely recognised.

Old challenges remain and new challenges emerge. The seeming incapacity of the Commonwealth to play any significant role in critical issues involving member states and which pose major security concerns to the international

community remains a major negative. These include the virtual ‘no go’ areas on the sub-continent e.g. ongoing disputes between India and Pakistan and the civil war in Sri Lanka; and the recalcitrant Cyprus problem.

Similarly, lingering unresolved issues will continue to test Commonwealth resolve e.g. contributing to the political and economic rehabilitation of Zimbabwe; helping in the restoration of peace and civil order in post-conflict Sri Lanka; advancing the democracy, good governance and civil rights agenda and in affirming a constructive role for CMAG as its ‘watchdog’ especially in Pakistan and Fiji.

New challenges also bring the possibilities of wider relevance: the fact that its most recent members are joining from previously unexpected sources - Mozambique, Cameroon and now likely Rwanda; small island states and climate change – who else speaks for them? capturing the younger generation of political and civil society leaders, harnessing their talents into the Commonwealth’s unique resource base.

In the end, success for international organisations is judged on the practical, qualitative difference they make on the ground to people’s lives and prospects. There is a renewed interest in multilateralism that provides the Commonwealth with opportunities to again prove itself. The ‘moment’ needs to be grasped to sustain the Commonwealth’s relevance and value into the 21st century.