Presentation

Colloquium of the

Commonwealth in the 3rd Millennium

Royal Commonwealth Society

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The Commonwealth Colloquium is meant to put us in a millennial frame of mind. In this session our topic is governance.

Over the last two decades, in all corners of the Commonwealth, governance has been an issue of debate. Whether driven by ideology or the practical need to regain fiscal health, the agendas of governments have changed. So have citizens’ expectations of government. The radical rhetoric of Mrs. Thatcher’s Britain may not have converted us, but touch us it did. We may not believe all the New Zealand PR about the social benefits of the changes they made, but if we are interested in public sector management we must take them into consideration.

Canada has made dramatic changes in its public sector - we too had to confront the deficit. In some provinces, addressing the deficit has been accompanied by rhetoric which no one would have considered “Canadian” a few years ago. The public sector has undergone considerable change.

Governance is not only an issue for the developing countries of the Commonwealth. Nonetheless, for the developing countries, improvements to governance are crucial if they are to make social and economic progress.

At the time of decolonization, the moral high ground was held by the ex-colonies. Then, the notion of “development” paid virtually no attention to questions of respect for human rights. After all, the former colonizers had made too frequent use of national security laws in their struggle to contain nationalist ambitions to be in a position to criticize the newly installed governments for their lack of democratic process. Politically, the new governments followed one of three courses of action: a) (the minority) continuous democratic government; b) the one party state; and c) military government.

As bilateral and multilateral development programs emerged, they were driven largely by the new “knowledge” of economic planning and with a touching faith in what government, indeed what well-trained professionals, could produce. Aid was heavily bureaucratized, frequently a
closed-door operation, its practitioners a devoted brotherhood.

Nonetheless, the investments through development programs, whatever their shortcomings, have produced results. As the UK Minister for development recently pointed out: since the 1960's, child death rates have been cut in half, people have more food to eat and the percentage of the population with access to clean water has doubled to 70%. In the last 50 years, more people have escaped from poverty than in the last 500 years.

For decades the Cold War intruded in development. Western countries’ aid agencies typically averted their eyes from appalling violations of civil and political rights. We chose not to talk about these issues with constructive frankness until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989.

Just like other multilateral organizations during the Cold War, the Commonwealth didn’t ask too many questions about the national governing behaviour of its members, with the exception of South Africa. The Foundation paper for this conference, prepared with the assistance of Nihal Kappagoda, outlines the approaches taken by the Commonwealth to governance and human rights.

Unlike other development assistance agencies, the Commonwealth Secretariat does not have an explicit policy statement on governance. However, the Millbrook Action Programme adopted during the 1995 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Auckland, New Zealand was intended to fulfill more effectively the commitments contained in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991 which was adopted at the CHOGM held in Zimbabwe that year. The Millbrook Programme was in three parts: advancing fundamental Commonwealth political values; promoting sustainable development; and facilitating consensus building.

The Action Programme called on the Secretariat to enhance its capacity to provide advice, training and technical assistance for promoting fundamental political values by:

- assisting in creating and building the capacity of relevant institutions, legal and constitutional matters, and the electoral field;
- observing elections;
- strengthening the rule of law and promoting the independence of the judiciary; and
- supporting good government particularly in the area of public service reform.

The Programme further sets out measures that would be taken in response to the violation of the Harare Principles such as the unconstitutional overthrow of a democratically elected government. It also outlines the mechanisms that will be set in place for implementing the Harare Principles. This was an extremely important step forward.

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Equally important was the prompt response to Nigeria’s flouting of these principles when the election was overturned. The intervention of Nelson Mendala and other Commonwealth governments, the creation of the Commonwealth Ministers Advisory Group, and the suspension of Nigeria reflect the strong support which Commonwealth members now give to democratic elections. You will recall the restrictive measures against Nigeria which Canada put in place immediately after Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed. CMAG, created to deal with serious and persistent violations of the Harare Declaration, focusses on The Gambia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, three Commonwealth countries governed by military regimes.

The Roundtable of Heads of Government of Commonwealth Africa on Democracy and Good Governance was a major activity undertaken by the Secretariat in 1997. This was attended by 16 Heads of State and Governments and provided an opportunity for them to review progress of democracy in their countries and exchange views on problems and challenges. This was preceded by a preparatory meeting which brought together 41 representatives of both government and opposition parties in practising democracies in Africa, some of whom had had little or no direct contact in their own countries.

The Commonwealth’s approach to governance, because of the particularities of the Commonwealth, can mobilise the political context essential to useful technical exchange. The meeting, which included opposition parties, touches on another great strength - the Commonwealth’s own “track II”, the non-governmental sector: educators, journalists, youth, professional associations from judges to parliamentarians and traditionalists. The Commonwealth has the potential to engage not only counterpart elements of the public services but a host of organizations active in democratic and not so democratic societies.

**PROPOSED AGENDA FOR THE COMMONWEALTH**

The Commonwealth is perceived by its members as being tolerant and cohesive. This should enable it to assist in defusing conflict in a manner that few other international institutions are able to. The consensus building mandate is based on this perception and the trust that members have that the organisation acts in their best interests without promoting an independent agenda serving outside or big power interests. Can these strengths of the Commonwealth be used to good effect to improve respect for human rights and the functioning of governments?

This same degree of trust exists when countries seek technical assistance from the CFTC. The Fund is relatively small, flexible and able to function with less bureaucracy than most other agencies. This enables it to respond to requests for assistance rapidly, and work closely with member governments at the highest levels in order to define needs more precisely and mobilise the assistance required. It can collaborate easily with other development agencies providing technical assistance and play a catalytic role in mobilising donor support. Its impartiality makes the advice offered by CFTC staff and consultants a valuable source of confidential policy advice.

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Recognising the strengths of the Commonwealth and the CFTC and the areas in which assistance is now being provided to promote good governance, support programs should be focussed on four priority areas and institutions against a backdrop of respect for human rights. These are the core institutions of government, promotion of the role of the private sector including an interface between the public and private sectors, law reform and development, and the promotion of democracy (See Table 1). Throughout, we should examine how these initiatives can work to improve women’s status and involvement - it is not good governance without them!

CONCLUSION

Given its budget, the CFTC’s contribution to these programs can only be small. There are a few exceptions such as the programs in debt management and elections monitoring which are significant. And other bilateral and multilateral donors also define these same areas as key.

However, the Secretariat can (and does) play a significant role in promoting good governance in the Commonwealth, much beyond the financing it provides. Since success of the programs will depend ultimately on the political will of the countries to bring about change, it is the political push of the Commonwealth that ultimately bears more weight than technical cooperation. At the heart of good governance is respect for human rights and democracy. All the courses in the world to improve the practices of auditors are of no use if journalists cannot report on the results. Good governance, like development, is not a technical issue. It is a political issue.

This year we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The Commonwealth must continue to put pressure on members who abuse those rights, who do not tolerate vocal opposition (the only way to achieve transparency) and who subvert free elections. In our discussion, let’s focus on how this very special multilateral group often referred to as a Club can use those close diplomatic connections to achieve democracy and respect for human rights for their citizens. After all, what use is a Club which permits members to flout civilized standards of behaviour?

The Commonwealth has articulated civilized standards at Harare and Cyprus. It enunciated processes to implement these standards at Millbrook. Let us use our time today to consider what else must be done to move this agenda ahead more quickly.
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<td>Improve the budgetary process</td>
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<td>Reform the Civil Service</td>
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<td>Strengthen the Audit Office</td>
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<td><strong>Promoting the Role of the Private Sector</strong></td>
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