

The Round Table's Commonwealth Organisations' Conference 2014

Chairman's Summary of Conclusions

1. Introduction

The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, together with the Commonwealth Association (CA) and the Royal Over-Seas League (ROSL), hosted a conference at the ROSL in London on 24 October 2014. The purpose of this one-day conference was to provide a common platform for Commonwealth organisations (COs): and to share experiences on how to improve impact and effectiveness; increase partnership and collaboration in the delivery of programmes; and engage more fully with the intergovernmental Commonwealth.

A report of the London conference is separately available but a number of participants also asked for a summary document, drawn up by the Chairman of The Round Table, which could pull together some of the main themes of the discussion and proposals for further action. What follows is not an agreed document, listing all the outcomes of the conference. Rather, it is intended to be an 'aide-memoire' by the Chairman which may prove helpful in moving forward.

2. Attendance

The conference heard a keynote speech by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Kamallesh Sharma, and took part in four panel sessions, with an array of expert speakers. Many Commonwealth organisations were represented, across the categories, as well as participants from member governments, the media and other civil society organisations. Further details are set out in the conference report.

3. The role of Commonwealth organisations

At a time when the Commonwealth itself has faced continuing criticism, many Commonwealth organisations have felt marginalised and unsupported.

a) Commonwealth Secretariat

After a long period in which most COs have had little or no formal contact or consultation with the Secretariat, the Secretary-General – in addressing the meeting - reaffirmed the commitment of the official Commonwealth to Commonwealth organisations. He outlined some of the key areas where he expected the relationship to be revitalised. This would include the return of regular consultation with Commonwealth and civil society organisations, within a new framework of collaboration, and the appointment of new liaison and partnership staff, within the Secretary-General's office itself. In line with the Secretariat's Strategic Plan and its commitment to strategic partnerships and results-based management, institutionalised mechanisms for collaboration with civil society would be established. The system of accrediting organisations to the Commonwealth had also been under review. As part of other changes, the Secretariat planned to include civil society representatives in the Secretary-General's delegations to global intergovernmental meetings.

b) Commonwealth Foundation

The Foundation's change of strategic direction and withdrawal of funding for Commonwealth organisations have had a negative impact, with some of the smaller professional bodies seriously affected. The Foundation maintained that it was still a critical friend of Commonwealth organisations but argued that it was necessary to interrogate the value of their work. In harsher circumstances, with ministerial meetings harder to penetrate and with professional bodies seemingly less valued, the clear message of the Foundation was 'adapt or die'. Many organisations accepted the realities of this message but had found it difficult to access either Secretariat or Foundation funding under the new criteria, with little or no feedback on why bids had been unsuccessful. The loss of the Commonwealth Media Development Fund, administered by the Secretariat, had been a particular blow to Commonwealth journalists and media organisations.

The following was evident from the session debate:

- In general terms, there needed to be a new framework for accountability and debate. This would include developing a culture of openness so as to help tackle what many saw as a democratic deficit at the heart of official policy-making in the Commonwealth;
- COs looked forward to the Secretariat reinstating its systems of consultation and information-sharing at the earliest opportunity, particularly in the build up to the Malta 2015 CHOGM. A full and up-to-date inventory of Commonwealth and civil society organisations should be maintained by the Secretariat;
- Many organisations found the current accreditation arrangements divisive and of limited practical value and called for consultation about the arrangements in future (particularly as regards the Malta summit);
- The Commonwealth Foundation was urged to adopt a more supportive approach to COs generally. It should also remain open to programme funding bids from COs (in line with the strategic plan) and be willing to facilitate these with advice and assistance;
- The Commonwealth Secretariat should be encouraged to establish limited partnership funding to assist with start-ups and help COs develop partnership arrangements with the Secretariat in programme delivery. It should also look to offering better meeting facilities, shared accommodation and possible secretarial and administrative support for Commonwealth organisations working closely with the Secretariat.

4. Building capacity, raising standards, and increasing collaboration in Commonwealth organisations

It was recognised that COs need to demonstrate impact, relevance and effectiveness, as well as showing how they achieve value for money. COs must be ready to adapt to new circumstances and able to be reliable and trustworthy partners – to be 'fit for purpose', in the current jargon. As organisations with a Commonwealth identity and focus, they needed to have governance arrangements, aims and objectives, and operating principles which accorded with Commonwealth values. Given that a number of organisations had been established and continued to be based in the United Kingdom, it was important to demonstrate a pan-Commonwealth reach in both governance and programmes. COs also needed to appeal to young people, develop and involve their membership and embrace the use of modern technologies and social media.

The following themes emerged:

- COs could do more to share with each other their experiences, especially as regards best practice and skills enhancement. They needed to avoid duplication and competition. There might also be opportunities for sharing costs, representation and information (for example, in attending international meetings, or in sharing office accommodation) and they might leverage funding and take part in lobbying campaigns together;
- There might also be possibilities for joint induction and training programmes, perhaps offered through the Commonwealth Secretariat;
- In implementing the Secretariat's Strategic Plan, all COs should be invited to an annual meeting, convened by the Secretariat, setting out areas for collaborative working in the delivery of programmes and inviting partnership bids from relevant organisations.

5. Commonwealth organisations, civil society and the space for engagement

Many COs were involved in advocacy and campaigning. These campaigns have ranged from achieving such milestones as the adoption of the Latimer House principles and the agreement on the Teachers' Recruitment Protocol to prominent campaigns on controlling the trade in small arms, on early and forced marriage or on LGBT rights. There were limited opportunities for CO/CSO engagement with Commonwealth governments in the Committee of the Whole, at ministerial meetings and at CHOGM itself. As regards the CHOGM, the CO/CSO roundtable with Foreign Ministers had potential as a space for dialogue and could be further improved but had produced little in terms of tangible outputs to date. Recommendations had also been put to the Secretariat where CO engagement could be enhanced in other respects. But there was recognition that, in view of recent attempts to improve the effectiveness of CHOGM as a forum for Heads of Government, above all, securing further opportunities for CO engagement at the CHOGM would be an uphill task. What had remained largely unexplored as an option was the novel recommendation of the 2011 Eminent Persons Group Report that Commonwealth and civil society organisations consider holding, with member governments, a major international meeting in the years between CHOGMs so as to create a space for more extensive and sustained engagement.

The following could be highlighted:

- There was considerable dissatisfaction with the limited space available to Commonwealth and civil society organisations for interacting with the official Commonwealth;
- There was concern that the Secretariat had not so far pursued reforms to the framework of civil society engagement with the intergovernmental Commonwealth, upon which COs were consulted in 2012;
- Engagement by COs with the intergovernmental Commonwealth should be seen as a process, not an event. There should be sustained campaigns over strategic issues. This required a focusing of the agenda, better lobbying and presentation skills in meeting governments so that contact was used to the best effect, and a better approach to feedback, evaluation and follow-up in pursuing issues thereafter;
- COs would look for the early reinstatement of the Commonwealth Secretariat's consultative process with Commonwealth and civil society organisations;

- It was also crucial that, in interacting with the intergovernmental Commonwealth, Commonwealth civil society had ready access to official Commonwealth agendas and documentation, well in advance of any meeting. There also needed to be proper feedback from the Secretariat on how documents, proposals and memoranda submitted to the intergovernmental process were considered and assessed;
- The current weakness of the intergovernmental Commonwealth, and its perceived ambivalence as a values-based and development organisation, was seen as a matter of major concern;
- A small group of senior Commonwealth figures, familiar with the work of Commonwealth and civil society organisations, could be asked to investigate the feasibility and potential benefits of a major Commonwealth civil society forum with governments in the years between CHOGMs.

6. Commonwealth reform and Malta 2015

After the 'lost summit' in Sri Lanka, there was a widespread hope that the Malta CHOGM in 2015 could re-establish the primacy of the CHOGM as a meeting of Heads of Government, first and foremost; could re-focus and re-energise the Commonwealth agenda and provide new leadership, including through electing a dynamic new Secretary-General; and could begin to rebuild the Commonwealth's credibility as a values-based organisation.

It would be no less important for the Malta CHOGM to address the growing issues affecting Commonwealth organisations and civil society, and their relationships with both the Secretariat and the Foundation. In the case of the former, new systems of engagement needed to be put in place with the intergovernmental Commonwealth so that effective working partnerships could be developed in delivering joint programmes on the ground. In the case of the latter, the growing marginalisation of Commonwealth organisations needed to be reversed through a more positive and inclusive approach.

It was also up to Commonwealth organisations to do all they could to help revitalise the Commonwealth. After all, they were collectively at least as well resourced as the Commonwealth's intergovernmental institutions. They needed to speak up for the value of the association in the media and illustrate the breadth and richness of its activities, including across the arts, culture, the sciences and sport.

7. The Way Ahead

In looking ahead, the final session dealt with some of the immediate tasks before COs and how to follow up the ideas raised in the conference. It was a time, in the words of Usha Prashar, for neither optimism nor pessimism but for hope; for unity across the Commonwealth's organisations; and for 'selfless leadership'.

Whatever may eventuate, COs could no longer rely on other bodies to protect their interests, coordinate their activities and share information and skills. While Commonwealth organisations, of whatever hue, had more in common with each other than were causes for separation and difference, and therefore should meet to exchange opinions and experiences, anything more than informal liaison at this point was unlikely.

However, there was support for the idea of a regular annual conference of Commonwealth organisations. Such a meeting, in addition to considering current Commonwealth issues, might explore in detail the multitude of challenges facing COs, from resourcing and fundraising, and membership and networks, to advocacy and modern media, and to measuring the impact and effectiveness of international programmes.

The following emerged:

- In view of the success of the meeting, there was strong support for the proposal for an annual meeting of Commonwealth organisations (beginning in 2015, in advance of the Malta CHOGM). This would be further explored, with The Round Table initiating consultations.

8. Conclusion

The above proposals have been drawn up by the Chairman of The Round Table in light of the discussion at the London conference. While this is not an agreed document, it is hoped that some of the ideas within it will be helpful in addressing the challenging issues ahead.

Stuart Mole

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