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The Modern Commonwealth – challenges in the 21st Century

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‘The Modern Commonwealth’....

I am prepared to admit that there are more than enough individuals in this country and beyond who would call that a contradiction in terms.

So perhaps the first challenge of the Modern Commonwealth is to dispel the myths that continue to surround it.

‘It’s just the British Commonwealth’, people say. In fact, the British Commonwealth died in 1949, with India’s independence and a new union of what were defined as ‘freely and equally associated states’. We are in large part former colonies. But we’re all proudly independent today and with equal votes, and we’re not just British in our roots. We include five former German colonies, eight French-speaking countries and one Lusophone, with a country like Mozambique already a member for 10 years, and another like Rwanda knocking on the door. Go back further, of course, and you find our members with histories dating back long before colonization.

‘It’s just a talking shop’, people say, *‘with no teeth’*. Well, its power is the power of moral authority and not of legal statute or army battalions; its teeth are sharp enough to suspend members, and hard-wearing enough to grind away until we achieve the change and standards we’re looking for. And as for ‘talking’, not only is that part of the very strength of our network, but it is also the precursor to our action, with Commonwealth experts and advisers ‘on the ground’, doing good and bettering lives.

'It's just the Commonwealth Games', people say. We are very proud of what are known as The Friendly Games, and for sure they are one of our most visible manifestations. But the Commonwealth Games Federation is just one of nearly 90 organisations and associations worldwide that make up the very special network that is the Commonwealth.

So somehow these 53 countries and 1.8 billion people – a third of the world's population, a quarter of its countries, and a fifth of its trade; countries rich and poor, large and small, and home to people of every colour and creed – all too often get this sort of summary dismissal.

That's why, in accepting this invitation to address the LSE today, I'm moved to dispel a few myths and start by telling you what the Modern Commonwealth actually *is*, before I tell you the challenges I think it faces in the 21st Century.

We are a richly diverse gathering of governments and of peoples, across five continents and three oceans. It is from history that our association emerged, but it is our shared values and goals that unite us today. What we do can be summed up in two words: Democracy, and Development. In policy work and practical assistance, all our energies go towards entrenching democracy and bringing about development, both economic and human.

So we talk, and we act.

When we talk, the world listens. Just one example: in 1987 a Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting first proposed the idea of bilateral debt relief, and the world took up the idea and ran with it. 10 years later, it was the Commonwealth which proposed the idea of multilateral debt relief, and again the idea took flight – once and for all at the G8 Summit in Scotland two years ago. So a generation later, a Commonwealth idea has realised an estimated \$100 billion of debt relief for 30-or-so of the world's poorest countries.

The ideas and talk lead to action on the ground, too, with hundreds of Commonwealth people out there as I speak – training women handicraft makers in Pakistan, training police officers in human rights in Sierra Leone, watching at polling booths in Kenya or Papua New

Guinea, determining maritime boundaries in the Pacific, funding youth businesses in Guyana, and many, many more. Talk can change policy and lead to new plans and good results – but you have to start with talk!

This, then, is the Modern Commonwealth: actively promoting democracy and development, and making them happen.

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Turning to my theme today, what challenges does the Modern Commonwealth face in the 21st Century? What few words of advice would I give to my successor as Secretary-General, when he is elected in a fortnight's time when Commonwealth Heads of Government meet in Kampala, Uganda?

Before I took up this job, I talked about the need for the Commonwealth to be '**relevant**' and '**credible**'. That hasn't changed. But let me now slice it even further. We must:

- stay **true**, to our values;
- stay **responsive**, to what our members want of us;
- stay **inclusive**, for the people who need us most; and ...
- stay **open**, to new members, new partners, and to the part we must play alongside other actors on the global stage.

No international organization has an absolute right to exist, and as the Modern Commonwealth approaches its 60th birthday, it has no automatic guarantee that it won't be pensioned off into retirement. But if we stay **true, responsive, inclusive** and **open** – then (in the crowded world of international organizations) we stay **relevant** and **credible**. We earn our keep, and we continue to deliver. I believe that we are already all of these things, so tonight I am *not* going to suggest sudden new departures. It is enough of a challenge to consolidate what we do, and to do it better. It is these factors – and these alone – that will ensure that we are still here in 50 years time, in 100 years time.

Let me say a little about each.

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First, then, the challenge of staying **true** to our values.

It's easier said than done. Rhetoric does not always live up to reality. We set down our values in what were then ground-breaking Commonwealth Declarations of 1971 and 1991, when we committed ourselves to the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. We have gone further with what we call our Latimer House Principles of 2003, which define and differentiate the three pillars of government: the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. In the same way, we are committed to human rights, and especially to the two 1966 UN Covenants – one guaranteeing civil and political rights, and the other on social and economic rights.

Not only do we state these things, but we have the capacity to enact them. In 1995, we developed the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group – made up of a rotating list of 8 Foreign Ministers – with the power to suspend or even recommend the expulsion of members who flout our rules. We put this Group to immediate use, when our leaders suspended Nigeria following the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and 10 others. No other international organisation – even the UN – has teeth as sharp as that.

Nigeria was suspended in 1995 and readmitted in 1999. Others similarly suspended were Sierra Leone in 1997, Pakistan in 1999, Fiji in 2000 and again last year, while The Gambia has been on the Group's agenda if not actually suspended, and Zimbabwe was suspended in 2002 and eventually decided to take itself out of the Commonwealth in December 2003. Interestingly, Sierra Leone's new democratically elected government in 1998 asked that it remain on CMAG's agenda even *after* democracy was returned, as it felt there was a further need for it to be there. That's the positive, not the punitive, power of CMAG.

Any politician will remind you of the dangers of hypocrisy in touting values and then not observing them. We have our fair share of such cases within the Commonwealth. Two countries are currently on our CMAG agenda – Fiji after the military overthrow of an elected civilian government last December, and Pakistan, arising from President Musharraf also retaining the role of Army Chief of Staff. More on

Pakistan later.... Meanwhile Bangladesh has had a caretaker government since January of this year, and we are watching that closely; and there are other Commonwealth countries which experience real political tensions. We observe elections which we sometimes judge to have serious flaws, as in Nigeria in April.

It is hard to practice what you preach, and yet I believe we do so, and I challenge us to continue to do so.

We are right to take stands, just as we are right – having done so – to do everything we can to bring them back into the fold. That is why we are talking to Commodore Bainimarama in Fiji about helping him meet his promise to hold elections by the first quarter of 2009. It's why I keep pushing General Musharraf to honour his promise about taking off one of his two hats; it's why I cautioned Bangladesh that they cannot drift without representation for too long. It's why, when we make what I hope is constructive criticism of an election as we did in Nigeria this year or Uganda last, we then work hard to address the deficiencies – strengthening independent electoral commissions, for instance, or improving voter registers. It's why I use the quiet diplomacy of my Special Envoys in places like Swaziland, Kenya, Maldives, Tonga, Lesotho, Zanzibar, Cameroon, The Gambia, and Guyana.

In general, the results speak for themselves. I often say, for instance, that Commonwealth Africa is in good shape, with 11 Commonwealth African countries having made the transition to multi-party democracy over the last 15 years. I often feel that perceptions of Africa in this country are between 10 and 50 years out of date.

The secret of proclaiming values is to conduct the quiet, painstaking work that shows you mean them. This is what we must continue to do. Take the one example of human rights, where only 18 of our member countries have ratified those two UN Covenants. We can shout from the rooftops, as I did – much louder and more critically than others, I may say – at the new UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in March. But behind all that is the practical work that makes things happen. We advise countries on how to meet the obligations of those two Covenants. We have supported a network of Commonwealth National Human Rights Commissions, for instance,

and we have developed a Model National Action Plan for Human Rights. We have also given that practical human rights training I mentioned, for police in some 25 countries.

That's the first challenge: to stay true to values, in what we do and in what we say.

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The second challenge is to stay **responsive**, to what our members expect of us, and to what the world presents to us. I believe we have done so, but I believe, too, that we can never, ever, afford to rest on our laurels. Yesterday's challenges are not today's; and what we do tomorrow is far more important than what we did yesterday.

The Commonwealth has moved with the times. In its first incarnations, it was instrumental in supporting the move to independence of many British colonies. Indeed, India's stance in bringing about the Modern, rather than the British Commonwealth, was in part designed to help other countries to follow in its footsteps, and 8 members in 1949 became 50 by 1989. In the 1980s, the Commonwealth stood on the bridge between North and South, advocating multilateralism in a changing world. And it was the Commonwealth which did so much in the '80s and '90s to dismantle the system of apartheid in South Africa.

We are always striving to stay one step ahead, or if not ahead, then at the very least on the pace.

As I mentioned, in the late 80s and early 90s that meant the Commonwealth leading global thinking on debt relief. Having conceived the idea, we now lead on its implementation: our special Commonwealth debt management software is in use in 44 of our own countries and 10 others – it was the World Bank who advised China that they should use our software.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Commonwealth far-sightedness meant shaking up the World Bank and the wider development community about the problems faced by the world's Small States. With 32 of our 53 states having populations of less than 1½ million, we have a

special interest. So we prepared ground-breaking reports on Small States' unique vulnerabilities, and on the ways that they can build on their inbuilt resilience and diversify their economies. And we went in to battle for small states, especially when we took on the OECD in 2000/2001 about their proposed restrictions on Small State financial centres – and won.

Meanwhile over the last five years, as we saw more clearly the problems of developing country doctors, nurses and teachers migrating to the developed world and leaving little behind them, we developed the Commonwealth Recruitment Protocols that seek to manage that flow – at both ends. These Protocols have now been adopted as international guidelines.

Another example of the Commonwealth's practical response to the issues of the day came in the wake of the UN's Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Resolution 1373. The Commonwealth took this up with a new raft of counter-terrorism legislation which its members could enact: in areas like money-laundering and extradition procedures.

So if we have moved so effectively with the times over the years, what are the contemporary challenges that we have to meet now, in 2007? Here are four.

One is the flip-side of standing up to terrorism and violence – it is bringing about dialogue and peace. When our Heads of Government last met in Malta two years ago, they asked us to examine our rich diversity and share amongst each other, and the wider world, just what it is that binds Commonwealth societies together.

The challenge is how to build communities, transcending ethnic, religious, linguistic divides. We also want harmonious communities that cross material, sexual and geographical divides. Just last Friday, a Commonwealth Commission chaired by Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen presented its new report on the subject, called *Civil Paths to Peace*. The report tries to help us understand tensions before we try to resolve them. It calls on us to look beyond faith, at the dynamics of all communities, and at ourselves as individuals with many different identities.

A second challenge is how the Commonwealth responds to the potential disaster of one of the global challenges of our times – climate change.

It is real enough in the Commonwealth. We see its effects: like shrinking rainforests, exacerbated by unsustainable logging practices, in Asia and the Pacific; like a thawing of the tundra in northern Canada; the encroaching desert in northern Nigeria; the flooded lowlands in Bangladesh, and the islands of the Maldives, Kiribati and Tuvalu which are barely above the waterline. The Commonwealth first published a study on the subject in the late '80s. It was at a CHOGM in the late '80s that the President of The Maldives first told the world that his islands were, literally, going underwater. In February this year, Commonwealth Environment Ministers met in Nairobi to agree a new Commonwealth-wide strategy to fight climate change, making best use of our extensive networks – as much of Ministries and parliamentarians as of groups like geographers, foresters, statisticians, meteorologists. Commonwealth Finance Ministers, meeting in Guyana in October, proclaimed the need to bring climate considerations into every aspect of government policy, and they also critically examined the economics and the financial implications of climate change.

So we've heard from Environment and Finance Ministers. At CHOGM, we will be expecting to hear from Heads of Government on climate change, in the run up to the UN conference on the subject in Bali in December.

Why? Because a call from a quarter of the world's states is heard. It can affect how the whole international community moves on an issue.

A third challenge is that, for the first time in human history, more people are living in urban rather than rural areas. About 330 million people, or one in six Commonwealth citizens, live in slums. Our task is to build on what we call ComHabitat which supports UNHabitat. It's a novel partnership looking at human settlements, which is finding new ways to finance shelter, clean water and electricity.

A fourth challenge is to keep pushing for a global trade deal that truly protects and advances the economic opportunities of developing countries. Last time our Heads of Government met, all 53 called on richer countries to have the courage to give more than they receive in the Doha Round. We keep pushing at the *policy* level – not least with some 30-or-so Commonwealth trade advisers worldwide sitting in national capitals and regional centres, and with active Commonwealth support for countries in the African, Caribbean and Pacific regions, as they negotiate their new Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union. Meanwhile our *practical* focus must be in individual countries. If they are indeed to trade in a fairer world without tariffs and subsidies, then we need to help make them ready to make the best of that. Otherwise, trade liberalisation could so easily signal the end of their ability to compete. The answer lies in what we call ‘aid for trade’, in the form of the help we give so that developing countries have new goods and services to offer, as well as the reconfigured laws and practices – like quick and efficient customs services – that actually allow for new trade.

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So first we have to stay true to our values, and second we have to stay responsive to the issues of the day. Thirdly, I said that we have to remain ***inclusive*** to those who need us most.

We still live in a world skewed towards the perspective of the adult male. Yet I hope that the Commonwealth is for *all* its citizens, rich and poor, male and female, young and old, health and unhealthy. But some of the facts tell us otherwise.

Take young people: nearly half of our Commonwealth is under 25, and nearly a quarter is under 5. Yet 70 million of our Commonwealth children have never seen the inside of a school, and 150 million are out of work.

Take women: count them up, and you reach 3 billion – half the people on this planet. Dis-count them, and you reach the state we’re in, where half of the people on this planet bear considerably more than half of its problems. The figure is, in fact, two-thirds, for girls out of school, those in poverty, those with AIDS.

Take minority groups; take those made social outcasts by AIDS: these and so many other groups are what I mean by 'those who need us most'.

So my third challenge is that we keep up our good work for these people, and that we never lose sight of them.

Hence the importance of our youth programme – 33 years old with offices and programmes on 4 continents – which gives youth training, micro-credit and mentoring, and which works with governments to establish a young people's element to precisely every aspect of government.

Equally, let's keep up our work to make gender equality a reality. The Commonwealth and its member countries have already done the policy work to ensure that gender is recognised as a component of all government policy: from health, to education, to business, to political representation. They have already produced the training manuals and capacity-building programmes to turn policy into practice. They have done important work on behalf of women to influence trade policy and negotiations, while at the same time trying to link poor women workers to global markets. If this all sounds too theoretical, remember those Pakistani women trained in handicrafts, or the women bee-keepers that we supported in Malawi.

We are a Commonwealth which supports the poorer, the weaker, and the smaller among us, whether countries, or individuals. I hope we will stay that way.

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Fourthly, I said that we must stay **open**, to new members, new partners, and to the part we must play alongside other actors on the global stage.

The Commonwealth has to be a dynamic and evolving organization, in a dynamic and evolving world.

That is why it has grown so fast, though admittedly not in the last 10 years. The time may well have come for us to grow again. The queue of potential new members gives a clue to the strength of 'the organization of democratic values'. Various countries are or were at various stages of showing interest in Commonwealth membership: at various times and in various ways, we have had expressions of interest from Yemen, Algeria, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Rwanda and Sudan, as well as the old British Somaliland and various dependent territories.

A special Commonwealth Committee chaired by former Jamaican Prime Minister PJ Patterson will report to our next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kampala, both on re-affirming the democratic *values* for would-be members – measurable largely in the strength of their democratic institutions – and also the *process* they will have to follow to become Commonwealth members.

Being open to the world means looking out on the world. We should continue to build alliances with others. We know very well that, on our own, we don't have the strength, the resources, the leverage to meet all our goals. Hence our willingness to see our ideas and expertise taken up and used by, for instance, the World Bank on Small States, the World Health Organisation on migrating doctors and nurses, the ILO on migrating teachers, the European Union and the African Union on building governance in Africa, the Pacific Islands Forum on building governance in the Pacific. Similarly, we must build on our partnerships with business, currently worth \$0.5 billion and counting through the Commonwealth Private Investment Initiative. All these partnerships have real momentum. And there are no limits to how open we should be. I have spoken to the Chinese government, for instance, about their and our involvement in Africa.

'Being open' goes further still. We often talk about the Commonwealth as an alliance of governments and peoples. Perhaps we are making needless distinctions here: governments, after all, are the representatives of the people, and in democracies people have a say in how they are governed. Yet of course they are distinct things: civil society organizations are some of the great amplifiers of the voice of normal people, their task is to cajole, to encourage, to comment, to challenge, to hold accountable. That is why we treasure

the worldwide network of organisations around the world that bear the precious name 'Commonwealth'. As I said, the Commonwealth Games Federation is only the best known of these – there are also associations of our parliamentarians, business people, lawyers, journalists, and many many more. Even our dentists and museum curators. Not only do these organizations do great things in their own right; they also feed actively into our our Government work and priorities.

So the challenge is to remain **open** to them all - new members, new partners.

Stay **true**, stay **responsive**, stay **inclusive**, stay **open**, and in doing so, stay **relevant** and **credible** – my challenges for the Modern Commonwealth.

I ask you: to whom did President Musharraf address his remarks in English on Saturday 3rd November, having announced a state of emergency to his own people in Urdu? He named three: the US, the EU, and the Commonwealth. Clearly, he takes the Commonwealth seriously. Clearly, he does not want to be seen to be violating Commonwealth values.

Now this very afternoon, I convened an emergency meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on Pakistan, and I am now in a position to tell you that when it meets again in Kampala on 22nd November, CMAG will suspend Pakistan if it decides that a series of necessary measures – which it has asked of Pakistan – have not been implemented.

Thank you.

ENDS

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In the event, at the last minute Mr McKinnon was unable to deliver the lecture, with Matthew Neuhaus, Director of the Political Affairs Division at the Commonwealth Secretariat, standing in for him.