

LSE public lecture

The Commonwealth at 65 – from London to Valletta

Dr Joseph Muscat
Prime Minister of Malta

London School of Economics and Political Science

Monday 21 July 2014

Check against delivery

<https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/Press%20Releases/Pages/2014/July/21/pr141655.aspx>

In many countries, reaching 65 years of age equates to retirement. When crossing this eminent threshold of time, should the Commonwealth, a trans-national institution, which pre-dates the United Nations, call it a day and withdraw from the international scene?

I will today share some thoughts on how I see the Commonwealth and what are some of the options to keep it relevant in the future. In doing so, I will try to avoid being pedantic, or indeed diplomatic, in my approach. Instead, I will approach the subject with the attitude of a 40 year old European, representing a small country celebrating its 50th year of Independence this year, and a proud member of the Commonwealth.

To me, the independent and Republican ethos of my nation was never an issue to be questioned. I always considered this a natural state of affairs. We consider not being an independent nation or not having a Republican constitution as unthinkable as England winning the World Cup!

Like many people from my generation, I cannot contemplate the idea of being a colony or of having a foreigner as a Head of State. Thus, the sentimental relevance of the Commonwealth is steadily decreasing in the minds of my compatriots, as it is, I believe, in the minds of many young people across the countries that make up this organisation. Indeed, I struggle to imagine such sentimentalism growing stronger among people who are 25 years or younger, who today make up for 50% of the Commonwealth population.

Nevertheless, the aspiration that our society should be both open to external influences and play a part in a wider international context, comes equally natural to us. All these elements, albeit seemingly contradictory, are partially the result of my country's history, an essential part of which is intrinsically interwoven with the Commonwealth, and what brought it about.

I will not bore you with the list of initiatives that the Commonwealth and its structures have developed over the years. Instead, I will try to tackle some deficiencies and suggest changes that could be considered to make this organisation more relevant in the years to come.

Even though there have been recent appeals by friends of the Commonwealth, the likes of the Rt. Hon. Frank Field, not to debate the organisation "as if standing around the bed of a mortally ill friend", we have to admit there are all the symptoms of division and dysfunction in an organisation that depends on unity and cooperation. While we should not prepare funeral rites, we need to admit that the patient is sick, before going on to make a diagnosis and prescribe solutions.

I believe that in the minds of many, the Commonwealth is seen as a vehicle of each and every member's relations, many times of the rollercoaster type, with the United Kingdom. Can it be otherwise?

I had my first opportunity to assess the formal Commonwealth institutions last year, when I attended the Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo. To be frank, I was expecting many things that did not materialise. One of these expectations was a condescending approach by whoever and whatever represented the British establishment. I am glad to say, I was wrong. United Kingdom representatives, before, during and after Colombo, went to great lengths to make it clear that they do not see the Commonwealth as "their" thing. They are aware of the history but keener on developing the future than reminiscing about the past. I was positively surprised by what I believe is a genuine willingness to play an active but, at the same time, rather egalitarian role within the organisation.

On the other hand, I noted a multitude of attitudes by the components of what I would term as "the rest of the world".

Smaller countries look at the Commonwealth as a means to foster their relationship with the United Kingdom and some other global players. I will not provide a complete list so as not to risk exclusions and since it is pretty obvious who the global mammoths are.

Smaller and peripheral countries see these meetings as rather exceptional occasions where they can rub shoulders with important international players, and have their ear in discussions crucial to their own economic development.

It is legitimate to say that in some quarters there is much more interest in fostering bilateral relations with a handful of countries rather than engaging in a genuine multilateral discourse that would produce a healthy debate on global issues, which such a genuinely trans-continental organisation is ideally poised to host.

And yes, there is recrimination, spoken and unspoken. It was very interesting for me to discover that during the so called Heads of Government retreat, there is free seating. I, for one, found this arrangement a fascinating exercise in geo-politics and the politics of development, one that uncovered many truths. I will not break confidentiality, but I must say that observing Prime Ministers standing, thinking, sitting, looking at each other, standing again, and then sitting in another place was a veritable snapshot of the north / south, developed / under developed, centre / periphery, big / small countries debate. It also left people like myself, coming from a small, developed, European country, in close proximity to the African continent, second-guessing where to sit!

So my first point is, let us do less finger pointing and tone down the blame game. It is time and it is politically correct to debate Britain's role in the Commonwealth. It would be acknowledging the elephant in the room, and I believe it would come as a huge relief to everyone, including the United Kingdom. Indeed, a nation that is ready to debate the secession of an integral part of it, and its own relationship with its immediate neighbours, would probably have no qualms in debating itself and its relationship with those countries who are mostly its former subjects.

It would be like a former wife and husband sitting down and having a decent conversation with no strings attached. Talking about the good and the bad times, and seeing how to make better the things that they still have in common.

This would offer many countries the opportunity to clear the air and hopefully get a break from the blame game. The United Kingdom is the source of many good and other not-so-good developments in our countries. I, for one, have no qualms in saying that on balance, Britain's 200 year direct influence on Malta was essentially positive. If anything, it left us with an impeccable Anglo-Saxon work ethic which we can couple with our Mediterranean lifestyle and food. And we

thank God it is not the other way round, since I cannot imagine myself living in a country with Mediterranean work practices and English food!

50 years ago, our people decided it was time to move on. The decision could not have come a day sooner and eventually led to a Republican constitution 10 years later, the closing down of British military bases, and membership of the European Union a decade ago. These events that are fundamentally tied to one another. Some of our strengths we owe partially to those two centuries of our history, as indeed we do some of our weaknesses. Nevertheless, we are what we are today because we are who we are, and because of the decisions we have taken.

My point is that while the United Kingdom cannot claim the sole paternity for success stories in the Commonwealth, other countries cannot keep thinking that Britain is uniquely responsible for problems that, many times now, are of their own making.

On a more practical level, in order to encourage a more fruitful multilateral approach at Commonwealth events, governments should, even with Commonwealth Secretariat's sustained support, spend more time fostering bilateral relations during the two year period between one Heads of Government meeting and another, and not schedule such meetings almost exclusively during these summits.

Furthermore, it would do the institution a great deal of good if Heads of Government took the time to meet informally at the margins of the annual United Nations General Assembly. It would help create the sense of missing camaraderie that could really make the difference at the end of the day. The Commonwealth commands 30% of votes at the United Nations, but almost always fails to put forward common candidates and adopt significant common stands. Such meetings would foster these possibilities.

Turning now to the wider picture, I would like to put forward some comparisons.

Malta also forms part of a gathering which is much smaller than the Commonwealth, but to which we and all other Member States dedicate paramount importance: the European Union. Why is that? Why is it that we devote so much time and resources to an organisation which is less than half the size, with a limited geographical coverage, and with potential economic growth that is currently nowhere near that of the Commonwealth. One important factor is geographical proximity. But stopping there would provide us with a very shallow explanation.

I would instead submit that central to the enhanced value of the European Union are its shared values, common rules and their direct economic benefits. Countries do not become Members because of their history, but because they show commitment and resilience in achieving the convergence which would see them qualify for the benefits of freedom of movement of goods, services, capital and people. Adjustment and restructuring are painful and come at a cost which is not only economic but also social and political. It takes years and is not completed upon membership. Instead, the process is ongoing.

There are countries that are geographically and historically European, but until now do not qualify to become members because they do not have the democratic and political commitment to deliver the necessary reforms. Part of these reforms have to do with sharing or even ceding responsibilities to supra-national institutions. That takes a lot of courage, and sometimes something more than that.

This is supplemented by the fact that the various institutions have the power to decide. Decisions are not on statements of intent, but rather actions that affect the everyday life of people from Copenhagen to Valletta, from Lisbon to Warsaw.

It is this high level of commitment that puts, in the minds of my people, the European Union on a much higher level of importance than the Commonwealth or even the United Nations.

On the other hand, for most member countries, membership of the Commonwealth is a historic fact. Like your parents, you do not get to choose them. Most countries did not actively choose to become members of the Commonwealth. Instead, membership was seen as almost a diplomatic obligation. On the other hand, joining the European Union equates to marriage. It is a choice about your future and not a statement about your past.

At this point, one might ask whether I am proposing a European Union-like structure for the Commonwealth. I must put the minds of my British friends at rest by clearly stating: no.

What I am proposing is that the Commonwealth should be about commitment rather than history. It should be about the future rather than the past.

To do this, in my mind, there are three obvious models which one could adopt.

The first is disbanding the Commonwealth as it is today and regrouping, setting out updated guidelines and Charter of Values to which participants must strictly abide. Whether or not one opts for such a model, the idea of further opening up Commonwealth membership to other countries near and far, and also allowing for consensual withdrawals from the organisation without acrimony, should be duly examined.

The second is that of a multi-speed Commonwealth. The Commonwealth today is a broad church. It groups countries, most of which would never dream of meeting each other had it not been for a common denominator in their history. Furthermore, the outlook of some of these countries is simply contradictory with that of others.

So, one might argue that for this organisation to remain relevant for the future is to have the present Commonwealth as the foundation for a much more integrated sub-group.

Members of this new Commonwealth could decide to adhere to strict rules, from democracy to gender equality, from religious freedom to minority rights (including LGBTI issues), from transparency to environmental sustainability. These rules should be much more stringent than the current Charter, with membership coming after close scrutiny, and screening being an ongoing process.

A third model emerges from a critique of the second, which can be seen as a formalisation of the ingrained differences between different groups of countries, and the creation of even more divisions. Rather than setting the bar too high for many to achieve at once, one could opt for an improved Commonwealth which would engage in more regular and dynamic exercises by means of which each and every country is offered more political and technical assistance. These programmes would be specifically intended to nudge towards better governance and more open societies, fostering convergence rather than divergence.

There might obviously be other models that could serve as a basis for change.

What is for sure is that change does not happen by itself or by accident. We need to work for change. Staring at a decaying organisation and hoping that its fortunes might suddenly turn around is delusional.

So, my take is that the Commonwealth should not retire, but should decide what it wants to be. It can opt to remain as it is and sink in total irrelevance within the next decade or so, or have the courage to make changes, by starting to tackle them at least in piecemeal fashion.

Having history as our sole bond is clearly not enough in today's world. In order to be relevant, the Commonwealth should be about people rather than diplomats. It should be about economic growth rather than bureaucracy. It should be about the future rather than the past.

This is the food for thought I put forward. It might be somewhat different from what is usually expected from politicians. I hope it serves its purpose.

END