

The Commonwealth in the 21st Century: Prospects and Challenges - the text of the 2005 Commonwealth Lecture

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HE Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria delivered the eighth annual Commonwealth Lecture on 15 March 2005. The theme of his Lecture was 'The Commonwealth in the 21st Century: Prospects and Challenges'. The text of the Lecture is reproduced below.

Secretary-General,

Members of Diplomatic Corps,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

I bring you greetings from the Government and people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and thank the Secretary-General for giving me the privilege of delivering the Eighth Annual Commonwealth Lecture.

Nigeria attaches great importance to its membership of the Commonwealth. On the occasion of Nigeria's admission as the 99th member of the United Nations, the first Prime Minister, late Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, remarked that "Nigeria is proud of its membership of the Commonwealth". Our country's post-independence history reveals the importance of its membership of this organisation. During the Nigerian crisis of the 1960s which eventually led to the civil war in 1967, the Commonwealth was the first international organisation to attempt a solution of the crisis. Secretary-General Arnold Smith organised the first ever peace meeting between the Federal Government and the leaders of the secessionist movement in Kampala, Uganda, in 1966. Thereafter, the Commonwealth took a stand to support the maintenance of Nigeria's territorial integrity. The Commonwealth's decision influenced the attitude of other international organisations and leading world powers, which contributed immensely to Nigeria's survival.

Secretary-General, the Commonwealth has all along been an important partner in the pursuit of our foreign policy objective. Our organisation's commitment to democracy, human rights, rule of law and gender equality tallied with Nigeria's commitment to the liberation of our hitherto oppressed brothers in Southern Africa and the establishment of non-racial societies in that region. Indeed, I can state that when the Commonwealth was established a number of Africans were initially suspicious and cynical of the aims and objectives of the organisation. To some, it was seen as no more than an epilogue to

Empire, and an effort to continue western domination in a different guise. But the record of the performance of the Commonwealth with regards to the liberation of Namibia, Zimbabwe and the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa removed whatever suspicion that did exist as to the aims and objectives of the organisation.

The history of the Commonwealth's role in bringing about the collapse of the apartheid system in South Africa is too well known to be repeated here. The emergence of a non-racial government in South Africa is regarded in Africa as one of the greatest achievements of the Commonwealth and a ringing affirmation of what the organisation stands for. Equally remarkable is the Reconstruction and Development Programme which the Commonwealth midwifed into existence in 1994 and which enabled the new state to take-off and have a good starting point. I cherish the memory of my participation as the co-chairperson of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) established at the Nassau Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 1985, the conclusions of which prepared the final diplomatic onslaught on the apartheid regime. The late Oliver Tambo, showing appreciation for the EPG, described the Group's report as "a watershed".

On a more personal note I recall the stance which the Commonwealth took when the leadership of my country fell under the command of a brutal military despot and under whose regime I suffered. While I have no regrets for the stand I took in the struggle for democracy at that time, I know that but for the reaction of the international community which was spearheaded by the Commonwealth I probably would not be alive now.

The facts mentioned above affected my reaction to the invitation to deliver the Eighth Annual Commonwealth Lecture. The invitation was accepted with a deep sense of gratitude and seen as an opportunity to put forward my views as to how the Commonwealth should conduct its affairs in the years ahead.

The Foundations of Our Strength

In choosing to speak on the topic 'The Commonwealth in the 21st Century: Prospects and Challenges' I have made a number of fundamental assumptions. The first of which is that the Commonwealth will continue to exist as an organisation that will be of benefit to its members and humanity at large. The second assumption is that prospects do exist for the organisation to maintain and improve its record of service to humankind. The third assumption is that in doing this, the organisation will face challenges arising from the nature of the global environment and the circumstances in which member states of the organisation find themselves.

Secretary-General Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the Commonwealth has come a long way. It has so far been a success. From its initial four members, membership has increased to 53 and includes almost all the former British colonies and even countries that had only some tenuous connection with the British Empire. I am informed that as of now, a number of countries have formally or informally applied for membership of the organisation. No one likes to join a losing team. Everybody wants to be with the winner.

Indeed, judging from the respect accorded to the organisation by the international community, the importance which member countries attach to their membership of the association, and the role which the organisation has played on various issues of global interest, it is easy to conclude that late Arnold Smith, the pioneer Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, was correct when he declared in 1968 that “a hundred years from now, the British will discover that the Commonwealth is one of their major contributions to history”.

The Commonwealth will continue to be a major player on the global scene. The challenge now is to consolidate its inherited strength, the achievements of the past, and use these as a basis for planning towards a better and more fulfilling future. In doing this, we must strengthen the organisation and its structures, deepen our bonds, expand the scope of our activities, build more viable networks within the organisation and with other partners, and define our priorities clearly at all times.

The strength of the Commonwealth lies in its origin, its tradition, its diversity, as well as its modus operandi. As I said earlier, it has within its fold 53 countries, some developed and most developing. Its 1.8 billion people constitute more than a quarter of the human race. They inhabit every continent and embrace virtually every ethnic group. The Commonwealth is not a special interest group, neither is it a regional organisation. But the Commonwealth is the only international organisation that has its members in every conceivable international organisation in the world. We must continue to build on this strength and strive to make the Commonwealth a household name all over the world, known for its pro-people policies and programmes and dedicated to the common good.

Post-Cold War Global Security

This is of particular importance in the light of the international situation created by the end of the Cold War. The international community universally and rightly acclaimed the end of the 40-year period of dissipation of energy during which division prevailed over unity, suspicion over trust, and preparation for war over the provision of peace. The growing friendship between the East and West seems to have provided a foundation on which global peace can be built. But the end of the Cold War has presented a new set of problems and challenges particularly for the developing countries of the world, 49 of which are Commonwealth members. While the Cold War lasted, it was a bi-polar world in which the USA and the USSR dictated war and peace. Some of the weak nations of the world exploited the situation to further their interests. The great majority of these countries attained independence in the years of the Cold War during which the logic of that confrontation served as the compass for the conduct of their external relations and provided the reference point for much else. Some traded on their strategic position, others on the value of their vote at the UN General Assembly. So long as the Cold War existed, these countries felt protected some how. But with the end of the Cold War, some of them are now faced with the problem of protecting and enhancing their security and how to ensure that the equality which is acknowledged to exist between all sovereign nations irrespective of size and resources, does not become in practice a mere ceremonial phrase. The Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and ironically America's attack on Iraq in 2003

unfortunately tends to heighten this fear.

No doubt, the United Nations has an important role to play in the effort to guarantee and protect the security of smaller nations and to make the world a safer place for all. But it will be unrealistic to assume that the UN alone can achieve all the desired objectives. If the efforts of the UN are to succeed, they will need to be supported by those of other organisations, including regional and sub-regional organisations. The Commonwealth has an important role to play in this regard and it is better positioned than any other organisation to do so.

The very nature of the Commonwealth puts it in an advantageous position to contribute to political stability and guarantee the security and prosperity of its member countries, and thus in the process contribute to a safer world. First and foremost, the Commonwealth can serve and has in fact been serving as a bridge across the major divides of the world. Its 53 members come from all the continents and oceans of the world. It has a common language and other elements of a common heritage such as similar administrative and legal systems which help its members to work together. Deriving from this common heritage, the Commonwealth can serve as an effective platform for a more meaningful and effective North-South dialogue. This will also prevent the views and interests of developing countries from being ignored and marginalised. The post-Cold War era presents the Commonwealth with boundless opportunities to redesign and refocus on priorities that are not coloured by the particular interests of the East and West, and to mobilise its members for those objectives that we all cherish.

The Commonwealth and the United Nations

Secretary-General, the founding fathers of the Commonwealth had this role for the organisation in mind when they emphatically proclaimed that “one of the objectives of the Commonwealth is the support for the UN and its purposes”. In Harare in 1991, the leaders pledged to “work with renewed vigour to concentrate on providing support for the UN and other international organisations in the search for peace, disarmament, effective arms control and the promotion of international consensus on major global, political, economic and social issues”.

One cannot help but be impressed with the manner in which the Commonwealth organisation has dealt with issues of global or regional importance which directly concerned our members, for example the eradication of apartheid in South Africa and our cooperation with the United Nations in Lesotho in 2001, in Papua New Guinea in 1997, in Sierra Leone between 1997 and 2000 and currently in Tanzania where the Secretary-General is officially designated as the moral guarantor of the Mwafaka agreement. I was pleased to read from Mr H Sekyi who reviewed our political programme, quoting the UN Secretary-General as expressing his appreciation for Commonwealth co-operation in South Africa, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. He expressed the hope, however, that “the liaison and co-operation of the Commonwealth will continue and be at a higher level than hitherto”. I will suggest that these be done in such a manner which increases the Commonwealth’s profile. There should be an intense monitoring of the political and

social conditions of the world and the identification of a suitable niche for Commonwealth action.

Good Offices Role of the Secretary-General

Secretary-General, I am sure you will not be too surprised of my recognition of the role which our organisation played in restoring democracy to my own country, Nigeria. It was the Commonwealth that first sensitised the international community to the excesses of the regime that preceded mine but one. The response of the international community contributed in no small measure to the restoration of democracy in my country. The combined effect of our programmes on conflict resolution officially known as the Good Offices role of the Secretary-General, and the strengthening of democratic values and electoral processes, have served the Commonwealth well.

At Coolum, Heads of Government accorded due recognition to the importance of the Good Offices role of the Secretary-General and directed that its scope be extended. The reason is obvious. There can be no meaningful social and economic development in an atmosphere that is riddled with conflict. The Good Offices role of the Secretary-General which seeks to promote reconciliation, peace and stability without prejudice to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states has been the flagship programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat. I am aware that over the last ten years, the programme has dealt successfully with several localised conflicts often exacerbated by economic and environmental problems. It has been observed that the programme is based on the goodwill and informality that obtains within the Commonwealth family, on its non-partisan and non-threatening character, and on the Secretary-General's close contact with Heads of Government.

The Commonwealth has also established a good track record of bridge building without a hidden agenda and a good experience at understanding and dealing with pluralism at both national and international levels. The respect for history, historical experience and national specificities has endeared the Commonwealth to millions around the world. This trend should continue.

There is no doubt that the Commonwealth enjoys comparative advantage in conflict resolution over many other international organisations. You should not rest on your laurels but strive to do better. One way of doing this is to ensure that in all attempts at conflict resolution, the underlying and fundamental aspects of the crisis should be studied comprehensively as much as in depth and far in advance as possible. The visible and proximate causes are often merely the external symptoms of a deep-seated malaise which unless treated and removed will persist in generating further symptoms, whatever palliatives are found for the present ones. May I also suggest, Secretary-General, that while continuing to intensify efforts at conflict resolution by finding lasting solutions to conflicts, you should now begin to focus more attention on conflict prevention. I believe you will discover that preventing a conflict will be more cost-effective and if eventually conflicts do occur the solutions you provide will be more lasting.

Taking pre-emptive action in potential conflict situations will certainly make your assignments easier. You may wish to give consideration to the establishment of something like an Early Warning system. This will need the establishment of a stronger Commonwealth presence at least in areas suspected to be prone to crisis. I am aware of the cost implication of this suggestion. But a start can be made by using the regional headquarters of the Commonwealth Youth Programme located in each of the regions as listening posts. I am a very strong believer in the power of consultation, dialogue, shared experience and collective commitment to peace building, love, harmony, understanding and social progress. If we pay more attention to these values, we can better prevent or manage conflicts.

Strengthening and Consolidating Democracy

Our programme on strengthening democratic values and electoral processes has been in very high demand and has won public acclaim. The training programmes provided for electoral, judicial and other officials in institutions that strengthen democracy have gone far in advancing the objectives of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration. The practice of observing elections has served to minimise fraud and increased public confidence in the electoral process. In some cases, Commonwealth presence at elections has made the difference between a politically stable environment and one that continues to be plagued by social and political crisis. One aspect of our election observation process which interests me is the practice of presenting recommendations designed to improve the electoral process in the member country. It is not enough to say whether or not an election has been free and fair. What is more important is the comment on the electoral process and providing suggestions as to how it could be enhanced and be made more efficient, reliable, transparent and effective. In our recommendations and suggestions the local culture, environment and milieu must be taken into consideration. For this reason the composition of an Observer Group or Team is also important.

Implementing Recommendations

Secretary-General, much as our democracy programme has won great acclaim I am not too sure of how viable our record of implementing the recommendations of a Commonwealth Observer Group is. I think that it is necessary to improve our capacity for assisting member governments to implement the recommendations of the Commonwealth Observer Groups so that between one election and the other, quantifiable progress on improving the electoral process can be identified. One serious obstacle to the emergence of a stable democratic culture is the fragility of political parties. In many parts of the Commonwealth, very few parties have survived the death or departure from power of their first leaders. Most political parties have been ephemeral formations usually put together at election times and they disintegrate as soon as they lose the elections. The Commonwealth should assist and encourage the emergence of political parties rooted in lasting philosophies and manifestos. After all, credible, well-organised, effective and functioning political parties are the bedrock of democratic political contestation.

We should also, in the post election period discourage the notion of winner takes all. The

view of opposition political parties should be respected and the leader of the opposition where there is an official one should be accorded all the respect due to his or her office. In such a case we should promote the concept of the loyal opposition. If the goal of all political parties is to promote peace, security, growth, development and democracy, then there must be some minimum political foundations that we can support to ensure political viability and acceptable values that shape political engagements. At election time, the Commonwealth should intensify efforts to discourage the abuse of incumbency. The ruling party should not be allowed to use government resources to perpetuate itself in power. A level playing field should be established to accommodate and enhance tolerance, inclusion, fair competition, and broad democratic values and practice. I am, of course, aware that some of the recommendations will involve a fundamental restructuring of the system with cost implications. The challenge for the Commonwealth is to lead that process and, if necessary, seek support from like-minded organisations.

Democracy and Development

When in Coolum Heads of Government decided to establish an Expert Group to deliberate on democracy and development, it was an affirmation of the interconnectedness of the two main objectives of the Commonwealth. Forty-nine of our 53 member countries are officially defined as developing. They are committed to the fundamental political values of our organisation. But at the same time, they are beginning to ask for the concrete dividends of democracy. To many of these countries, one very important value of the Commonwealth is the opportunity it provides, more than any other international organisation, for them to have first-hand personal contacts with leaders from the developed parts of the world in pursuing their developmental objectives. The recent move by the Secretary-General to devote more time at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings for the 'retreat' is a step in the right direction.

The question some of the developing countries are asking is why can't the developed members of the Commonwealth spearhead policies and programmes, within their countries and other associations or clubs particularly of other developed countries to which they belong, that will advance the cause and interests of the developing countries. Such issues as overseas development assistance (ODA) and debt relief easily come to mind. Here, one must applaud the British Government's initiative of the Commission for Africa and hope that while consensus is being canvassed and mobilised for the Report, the British Government will show sufficient political will and courage to act according to the Report and the Government conviction. It can be done and it should be done. This is the time, otherwise all credibility will be lost.

We members of the African Union within the Commonwealth will contribute in whatever way we can to the attainment of the objectives of the Commission. Equally contributing is UK Chancellor Gordon Brown's plan for a new Marshall Plan for Africa which includes among others, writing off the debts of the low-income nations and drastically increasing aid budgets. This is an example of what the Commonwealth can do.

Secretary-General, if the Commonwealth is to remain relevant to these countries, it must

be seen to be contributing effectively to their economic viability by addressing the issues of debt, poverty, unfair trading systems, the denial of market access and the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Commonwealth must be seen as an organisation that stands by the highest standards and can be expected to, at all times, be on the side of promoting democratic values, supporting democratic consolidation, encouraging holistic reforms, and providing technical support as may be required by its member states.

The case for Africa is compelling. The present grim state of Africa should be seen as a scar in the conscience of the world: a fact recognised by Prime Minister Tony Blair. Despite decades of developmental efforts, the lives of millions of our people remain blighted by scourges of poverty, hunger, disease and ignorance. In 2004, 191,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa died each month from AIDS-related illnesses alone. More than half-a-billion Africans meanwhile survive on daily incomes that would be unbelievable to children in the developed world, and since 1981, living standards in the Sub-Saharan region have actually deteriorated with national incomes per head dropping by 10 per cent. We are prepared to admit that part of this problem is of our own making. Official corruption, weak and incompetent leadership, bad governance, fiscal indiscipline, excessive dependence on foreign aid and neglect of internal economic opportunities have been our bane. Mr Noberg, the free market campaigner noted how in one of our countries it took the ruler just five years to wipe out a third of the national wealth, while poverty escalated and agricultural production collapsed forcing the inhabitants to struggle with hunger, disease and death.

Africans and their leaders are aware of these problems and have already begun to take actions to correct most of these ills. The establishment of the African Union and the adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) are symbols of our willingness and our preparedness to take our destiny in our own hands, by taking effective political and economic actions to ensure political stability and to improve the living standards of our people. But we need support from the international community on the basis of partnership, common humanity and shared interest, and this is where the Commonwealth comes in.

The developed countries of the world need to be persuaded to remove the existing trade barriers and open western markets to the developing world. Free trade is one of the most effective weapons in the fight against global poverty. The iron curtains of protectionist barriers in the form of tariffs on Third World goods and subsidies of its own industries which the Western world has imposed ought to be relaxed. As of now, the steepest duties tend to be imposed on the type of goods that the poor world can most benefit from selling: agricultural products, labour intensive manufactured goods and commodities. Worse still, tariffs escalate and raw commodities and produce are processed into higher value added goods with the effect that Third World nations are deterred from building up manufacturing capacity at the simplest level.

Commonwealth leaders pronounced on this matter in our last meeting in Abuja. I am pleased to note that the delegation of Commonwealth Trade Ministers who visited world financial capitals to solicit for an agreement on the Doha Round of trade negotiations met

positive response. I hope that it will translate into positive action. I am also encouraged by the positive signals which emerged from the recent World Economic Summit at Davos.

Commonwealth Secretariat Development Programme

Secretary-General, our developmental programme should be intensified and invigorated. The small size of the budget notwithstanding programmes and projects organised by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) have contributed to the achievement of the developmental objectives in many developing member countries. It meets special needs and bridges strategic gaps in development which makes it different from other multilateral institutions. It has proved to be responsive to modest requests for assistance and has the flexibility to manage small projects. In addition, it provides easy access to member countries particularly small states, because it is not encumbered by elaborate protocol or multiple hierarchies. But, Secretary-General, you need to take care of some of the identified weaknesses of the CFTC operations in order to increase its effectiveness. The size of the CFTC annual budget, which is around £20m, is too small to enable it to have a meaningful impact on 49 developing countries, and its programmes are much too widespread. The programmes could be made to have a more cohesive purpose. The scarce resources are distributed too thinly across projects. The projects which have a critical mass, or a consistent follow through to ensure a lasting impact, are few and far between. The programmes lack a country focus and there are almost no regional perspectives. The Commonwealth states its belief in and support for regional organisations. But there are very few projects that the Commonwealth through the CFTC is doing with ECOWAS, SADC or ASEAN. I am told that you have established contact with NEPAD headquarters on a number of issues including the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). I would like to see concrete evidence of such co-operation in the near future. You can count on the fact that a systematised approach will receive overwhelming support from our members.

Many of today's leaders in the Commonwealth have had the benefit of exposure to Commonwealth education programmes through the Commonwealth scholarship programme. The programme should be strengthened, even expanded because the more professionals that pass through this programme, the more secured is the future of the Commonwealth. The Education Section of the Secretariat should be able to support low priced editions of standard textbooks across disciplines through appropriate copyright arrangements. In this way, students in poor countries can have wider access to appropriate study materials. Establishment of visual libraries can also help. The support can easily extend beyond an exchange of students to an exchange of teachers, researchers and scientists between Commonwealth countries. I know that virtually all member countries will support such an initiative because we need to deepen those bonds that we share, promote understanding, and establish new values to support peace and democracy.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth has a bright future. Its prospects for making the world a better place

are almost unlimited. The 21st century should see the Commonwealth as a force for good in the promotion of peace, democracy, good governance, gender equality, human rights, rule of law and sustainable development. The organisation should continue to be a catalyst for global peace, cooperation, security and development. But it should also accept the challenge of making the developed countries aware of the views of the developing world and help in spearheading policies and programmes to ameliorate the plight of developing countries.

The world is now a global village. Globalisation should make allowance for meaningful economic co-operation. The present situation of the globalised world in which there are few winners and majority losers should be reversed. I challenge the Commonwealth to continue to work on conflict prevention and resolution, strengthen democracy, and be the keeper of the conscience of the world in bringing about fair terms of trade and a type of globalisation where we will all be winners. In doing this, the Commonwealth would need to strengthen its range of co-operation with other international organisations and effectively play the role of the bridge-builder between the North and the South. Again, I believe that if we all continue to act together, work together, reason together and plan together, we can make the Commonwealth not just the organisation to emulate but also ensure that our member countries enjoy boundless benefits that promote peace, security, love, co-operation, democracy and development.

I thank you for your attention.