Good governance in the Commonwealth: Many cultures, one agenda

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Introduction

On 2 October 2013, a statement broadcast on The Gambia's state television announced that ‘the government has withdrawn its membership of the British Commonwealth and decided that The Gambia will never be a member of any neo-colonial institution and will never be a party to any institution that represents an extension of colonialism’. This provoked a welter of contrasting responses, ranging from very supportive comments by those who continue to be critical of the UK's past imperial role, to the rather blander statement by the UK's Foreign Office that they regretted The Gambia's departure. It also highlighted the crucial importance that cultural diplomacy must continue to play in the Commonwealth.

This short commentary emphasises three key points: that the Commonwealth has the potential to be a considerable force for good; that much of its value lies in its diversity; and that very considerable effort in terms of cultural diplomacy is required if we are to realise its potential. The Gambian Government has rejected this agenda as being too demanding, but somewhat ironically such challenges to the Commonwealth are also in large part because the UK Government has itself not always played a strong role in its engagement with other Commonwealth countries.

Global principles?

The Commonwealth, of course, is not the ‘British Commonwealth’ and, in contrast to the outspoken views of many of those supporting The Gambia's decision, there is actually much less support for the Commonwealth in the UK than can be found in some other Commonwealth countries.

For many in Britain, particularly the youth, the Commonwealth is an anachronism and one that represents no particular economic asset – perhaps, rather, an economic drain.

The Commonwealth Charter, agreed by all Commonwealth Heads of Government in December 2012, provides a fitting starting point for such a discussion. The titles of the 16 paragraphs that summarise its core values and principles are listed in Figure 1 and highlight the Commonwealth's emphasis on consensus and common action, mutual respect, inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, legitimacy and responsiveness. Initial reactions to The Gambia's withdrawal from the Commonwealth suggest that, having signed the charter almost a year ago, the government no longer felt able to adhere to some of these principles, especially relating to human rights, tolerance and freedom of expression. The fundamental point to be made about this, though, is that these principles are not those of Britain or the UK, but rather those of the countries of the Commonwealth as a whole.

Many of the 16 principles of the Commonwealth Charter are complex and open to contested interpretations. It is actually a remarkable achievement to have reached any agreement over them at all! The conviction that ‘democracy’ is a (or the) good political system, for example, has become much more widespread since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s but, as David Held has so lucidly highlighted, there are actually many different kinds of democracy. Moreover, some states that claim to practice democracy at home apparently see no harm in seeking to try to impose ‘democratic’ systems of governance on others by military force, which is scarcely a democratic process.

Box 1: Sections of the Commonwealth Charter, 2012

1. Democracy
2. Human Rights
3. International Peace and Security
4. Tolerance, Respect and Understanding
5. Freedom of Expression
6. Separation of Powers
7. Rule of Law
8. Good Governance
9. Sustainable Development
10. Protecting the Environment
11. Access to Health, Education, Food and Shelter
12. Gender Equality
13. Importance of Young People in the Commonwealth
14. Recognition of the Needs of Small States
15. Recognition of the Needs of Vulnerable States
16. The Role of Civil Society
Likewise, the concept of human rights, to which so much of the UN system resorts as an absolute arbiter of decision making, has in recent years come under considerable scrutiny. There is now growing acceptance that the human rights agenda does not amount to much without adequate attention to the bearers of all corresponding responsibilities, be they individuals or states. Similarly, a commitment to sustainable development has increasingly become seen as a sine qua non in international agreements and agendas over the last half century, but at its heart there remains a fundamental contradiction: development implies change or growth, and yet change by definition is not something that is necessarily sustainable. The purpose here is not to tease out these questions in detail, but rather to highlight that, by signing up to such broad principles, people can actually mean very different things by them and that such differences can lead to discord and difficulty unless mediated through effective cultural dialogue and diplomacy.

Values of the Commonwealth

There are five aspects of the Commonwealth that are of immense value in this context.

First, is the shared legal tradition of the Commonwealth, largely based on the principles of common law, and a focus on maintaining the judiciary separate from the legislature and executive.

Second, the ability of many people across the Commonwealth to speak variants of the English language can be an immense source of common understanding; indigenous and ‘national’ languages remain hugely important to individual and national cultural identities, but this use of English is nevertheless extremely valuable not only as a working language for international politics, but also for helping to reduce potentially divisive inter-communal conflict.

Third, the diversity of the Commonwealth, bringing together 2.1 billion people, from more than 50 countries spread across every continent, should be celebrated as a very real strength, although it requires considerable skills of cultural diplomacy to prevent it deteriorating into dissonance, as reflected in the departure of Zimbabwe and The Gambia.

Fourth, the value attributed to education – not just for the economic motives that have so come to dominate rhetoric on education today, but more importantly for cultural and social reasons – is critically important for ensuring the shared understanding that lies at the heart of crafting a peaceful and prosperous Commonwealth.

Fifth, the Commonwealth should return to its original meaning as being for the ‘common weal’ or common good. The Commonwealth has a profoundly important role to play in counterbalancing the excesses of greed and individualism.
fundamental to so much of the ‘market-led’ policy discourse dominant in our times. This is closely allied to the distinction between individual human rights and communal responsibility noted above, and highlights the importance not only of all the countries of the Commonwealth seeking to communally support each other, but also of the responsibilities of Commonwealth governments in delivering essential public services to all of their peoples, and indeed the responsibilities of individuals to address the common good at least as much as their own selfish interests.

Challenges

Achieving such a vision is by no means unproblematic and at least five main challenges for cultural diplomacy must be overcome if the Commonwealth is to fulfil its potential:

1. **A failure to understand each other.** The immense cultural and ethnic diversity of the Commonwealth means that people can use the same words to say similar things, especially in their own versions of the English language, but actually mean very different things. This can lead to very unfortunate and damaging misunderstandings and it is therefore crucially important to ensure that close attention is paid in Commonwealth discussions to clarifying intended meanings. At a deeper level, there also remain considerable difficulties with the arrogance of privilege.

2. **The dominance of an economistic mentality.** Cultural diplomacy has value in its own right in building shared understanding and thereby creating a more peaceful world. However, in most walks of life, and especially in contemporary international ‘development’ agendas, the global system has become increasingly dominated by economic rhetoric and priorities. In recent years, such emphasis has in practice led to there often being greater inequality both between and within countries across many parts of the world, with insufficient attention being paid to the needs of the very poorest in our societies. To resolve this, there needs to be a fundamental recalibration of global priorities to address social and cultural issues at least as much as economic priorities.

3. **A focus on the individual rather than the community.** As outlined above, the contemporary world is defined very largely by a focus on the individual rather than the community and on individual human rights rather than communal responsibilities. Yet at the heart of the Commonwealth there is an implicit emphasis on the crucial importance of the...
common good, and thus communal interests and values. A shift in focus to there being greater attention paid to the responsibilities of individuals and states to each other, although not easy, is thus a fundamental requirement for enhanced cultural diplomacy within the Commonwealth.

4. **Wise leadership at all levels.** All the evidence in the literature on partnerships emphasises the critical importance of strong and wise leadership at all levels. For the Commonwealth to flourish as a true partnership, such leadership must be present. It is here that the instance of the President of The Gambia’s recent decision is so pertinent. To be sure there are some vestiges of reticence, resistance or even denial throughout the Commonwealth over the harm done through European colonialism, but there does now seem to be a much more mature understanding that if we reject imperialism today it is a new and different ‘we’, a concern about present and future, not just the historical record. One of the reasons why the UK as the former metropolitan power does not play a stronger role in the Commonwealth may well be because of the sense of collective guilt over its imperial past that has permeated its education system and imbued many of those taking decisions about its engagement with other countries across the world. This has meant that the UK has often been surprisingly reluctant to engage more closely with Commonwealth countries and indeed somewhat reticent in promoting the Commonwealth more widely amongst its citizens. Those involved in the Commonwealth must all learn from the past but work with present realities if the Commonwealth is to survive as a viable entity.

5. **A lack of understanding of the potential of the Commonwealth.** No organisation should survive unless it continues to deliver effective benefits for its stakeholders. It is crucial that these are clearly articulated and promoted, and cultural diplomacy plays a very significant role in so doing. Despite the problems associated with the themes of the Commonwealth Charter, the shared values adhered to by millions of people across the Commonwealth, in large part through the legal and educational systems touched on above, are a uniquely worthy foundation; but their value remains considerably underplayed. For the Commonwealth to survive, it must continue to champion these values, especially among the young, many of whose lives are shaped primarily by economic agendas, the material and the virtual, as never before.

**Practical actions for the future**

In conclusion, there are five very practical ways through which cultural diplomacy can be enhanced more effectively in the interests of the Commonwealth.

First, much more effort needs to be placed on the development of shared understanding, especially on the importance of cultural agenda, and the need to counter increasingly dominant individualistic economic agendas by placing greater emphasis on the common weal that lies at the heart of the Commonwealth.

Second, greater focus needs to be placed on the recognition of the mutuality of interests and benefits that can accrue from the unique set of partnerships that comprise the Commonwealth. Both the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission and the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation have very much sought to emphasise this mutuality in their activities in recent years.

Third, effective cultural diplomacy does not just happen. It requires considerable care and financial support. Appropriate resources must be put in place to ensure that such benefits are delivered in the interests of all, and the real economic benefits that can result must also be clearly articulated.

Fourth, education plays a central role in delivering the shared understandings, particularly among the young, that are so important for building the Commonwealth and ensuring that its values are maintained. Digital technologies, when used effectively, can play a powerful role in supporting such collaboration between young people, schools and universities across the Commonwealth, as can scholarships that bring people face-to-face with those living and working in other cultures.

Finally, great care and skill is necessary in balancing the many tensions between the forces tending to enhance either diversity or uniformity within the Commonwealth. Ultimately, our challenge is to recognise and celebrate the value of diversity in the interests of the common good.

**Endnotes**

1 This thought-piece builds on a presentation given at a conference organised by the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy in London in July 2013.

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