

Peace, Democracy and Good Governance: The Role of the Modern Commonwealth

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Mr. Emmanuel Arinze, President of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, Ms. Lois Irvine, Secretary General of the Association, ladies and gentlemen: I want to begin by expressing my deep gratitude for your kindness in inviting me to address your triennial meeting here in this beautiful country of Barbados. I am all the more appreciative as I am perhaps the only one in this room whose experience of museums is confined merely to visiting them. While I am confident that each participant will learn a great deal from the discussions this week, the extent of my ignorance of your professionalism is such that I am likely to learn more than any of you. As you will understand, I am keenly looking forward to what will be for me a highly educative experience.

Having come clean about my lack of knowledge in respect of museums (about which, I should add, your Secretary General was fully aware when she so kindly asked me to be here), you will, I hope, forgive me if my remarks this afternoon concentrate on the Commonwealth rather than the professional dimension of your Association's title.

This is a very important anniversary year for the modern Commonwealth, and last month was the most special in that year. For it was on 27 April 1949 – exactly fifty years and nine days ago – that Commonwealth Prime Ministers adopted the London Declaration. That agreement reconciled republicanism with continued membership of the Commonwealth, which transformed our association into a group of fully sovereign and independent countries. As you know, thirty-three of our fifty-four members are currently republics and a number of others – some, indeed, in the Caribbean region – are contemplating becoming republics.

The London Declaration represented a momentous decision by the Prime Ministers of the eight countries – namely the old Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, and the new nations of India, Pakistan and Ceylon (as it then was) together with the United Kingdom – which at that time constituted the Commonwealth. It transformed its character from a relic of the British Empire into a co-operative association of free, independent and sovereign nations. It was then that it ceased to be the “British Commonwealth” and became “The Commonwealth”.

While India was the first country to use the declaration to become a republic within the Commonwealth, it is perhaps a little sad to recall that the agreement was reached just a few days after Ireland formally became a republic and left the association. On a more positive note, there is at present a debate in Ireland about the possibility of that

country rejoining the Commonwealth. Our Secretary-General has made it clear that any such application would meet with a most friendly and positive response.

I am an old hand in the Secretariat's service, having joined the organisation in 1971 under Arnold Smith of Canada, our first Secretary-General. I can remember him stating on a visit to the Organisation of African Unity in the early 1970s that the modern Commonwealth was largely the creation of the leaders of national liberation movements who wanted to continue mutually beneficial contacts with Britain and with one another through the Commonwealth after independence. In that he was absolutely correct.

The modern Commonwealth is an association of equals, with no centre and no periphery. While some people mistakenly still appear to believe that Britain has a special and leading role in the Commonwealth, that is simply not so. While the United Kingdom is a valued member of our association, it is no more (and of course no less) important than any other member.

It is very clear that the modern Commonwealth represents the antithesis of colonialism, the abnegation of imperialism and a true expression of internationalism. It consists of sovereign and independent countries drawn from every continent. All the planet's oceans wash its shores and its 1.7 billion people comprise more than one quarter of humanity. They encompass a broad range of races, religions, traditions and language groups, and represent a living demonstration of the successful pursuit of unity in diversity. The world needs organisations, such as the Commonwealth, which bring together different peoples; not in order to make them similar but to foster understanding, co-operation and development within the framework of diversity.

In deference to the historical interests of distinguished museum people such as yourselves, I thought that I should not just refer to our modern Commonwealth but should, perhaps, mention the use of the term in another much older though still appropriate context. In consequence, I should like to quote John Milton. In 1644 – 355 years ago – he wrote the following words.

“For this is not the liberty for which we can hope, that no grievance should arise in the Commonwealth, that let no man in this expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for”.

I hasten to add that the poor man was, of course, writing in times before the language of gender inclusivity had been invented. He did not, I feel sure, intend to exclude the ladies. Be that as it may, in all other respects the modern Commonwealth fulfils his criteria and is, pellucidly, what he wanted his Commonwealth to be. Consultation is indeed the lifeblood of our modern Commonwealth and helps to soften the edges of confrontation through collective consensus. In the words of our second Secretary-General, Sonny Ramphal of Guyana, while the Commonwealth cannot negotiate for the world, it can help the world to negotiate.

In looking to the future and the Commonwealth's potential to shape it, perhaps it would be useful to consider briefly the major events of the 20th century and the momentum for change deriving from them. On the debit side, the last one hundred years have been the bloodiest in history. The list of appalling episodes this century contains is a long one, including the negative aspects of colonialism, the evils of Nazism and the Holocaust, other forms of vile dictatorship, large numbers of wars including two involving the whole world, many acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing (one thinks of the recent tragedies in Bosnia and Rwanda – and the current situation in Kosovo), numerous acts of aggression and terrorism, ever more sophisticated methods of destruction – nuclear, biological and chemical as well as conventional – and a rise in violence rooted in racial and ethnic rivalry, religious fundamentalism, chauvinism and xenophobia.

On the credit side, there has been a growing understanding of the vital importance of international co-operation. This is no longer confined to a few idealists, but is acknowledged by all sensible people as a pressing necessity. Its most tangible expression is the establishment of the United Nations and its agencies, together with other international and regional organisations which have co-operation between people as their main aim. There is also growing enthusiasm for environmental concerns and issues of gender equity (particularly among the young) and increased dissemination – through new technologies of communication and other means – of the benefits of discoveries in many fields, including agriculture, medicine and science. In all these positive areas, the Commonwealth has important roles to play.

Having visited and marvelled at many museums throughout the Commonwealth, I am a firm fan of those such as yourselves who are responsible for them. It is evident that you are all what I would call constructive idealists as well as educators – as the best teachers always are – and that while you have a deep and abiding commitment to what is right and true and good, you have also a great interest in practical realities. In consequence, some of you may be thinking that it is all very well to describe what the Commonwealth is, but it would be good to know more about what it does. In short, what use is it? Let me attempt to answer.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has programmes of practical assistance in all these areas and, while the task is huge, steady progress has been made. For example, if I had been speaking to you eight years ago – in 1991 – I would have had to regret the fact that nine of our member countries were at that time under one party or military rule. While I would be the first to admit that not all Commonwealth countries are perfect democracies, we have now only one under military rule: Nigeria – and it is in transition from it. Because of its record of human rights violations, that country was suspended from the Commonwealth in 1995. Following the death last year of General Abacha, his successor General Abubakar has courageously set Nigeria on a course of change, with the Commonwealth assisting and observing democratic elections at no less than five different tiers of government over the course of the last five months. As the President-elect, Olusegan Obasanjo, prepares to take office in a little over three weeks' time on the 29th of

this month, we hope and expect that Nigeria will then have formally returned both to the democratic fold and to full Commonwealth membership.

On the economic front, the debt issue is one in which the Commonwealth has taken a lead in such areas as the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative – HIPC for short – by which it is hoped that a considerable percentage of the world’s poorest people may be able to escape the crippling burden of debts which their countries, quite simply, cannot repay. Without that path out of poverty, the future for hundreds of millions would be immeasurably weak. However, these efforts must go hand in hand with the necessary capital for creating the sound employment opportunities on which sustainable development depends. In consequence, the Commonwealth is establishing regional investment funds in Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and South Asia to help member countries attract the investment capital which they so desperately need.

Then there is the Secretariat’s own Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (the CFTC) which – despite modest and, alas at present, diminishing resources – continues to do an excellent job with its annual budget of approximately £20 million. The CFTC’s activities are confined to the provision of experts, technical advice and training. During the last two years, about 700 CFTC experts – mostly from developing countries – have undertaken assignments in countries other than their own and over 9,000 citizens of Commonwealth developing countries have received training abroad. On the technical advice front, public sector reform has been facilitated in twenty countries, the development of mineral and petroleum resources fostered in seventeen countries and maritime boundaries defined for a further six.

With regard to the environment, the Commonwealth’s contribution to the Kyoto Conference on climate change was of crucial importance in ensuring its successful outcome, while – just a few hundred miles away from our meeting here this afternoon – the Commonwealth’s Iwokrama Rainforest Programme is making good progress in managing the 360,000 hectares of pristine rainforest which the government and people of Guyana have generously provided for Commonwealth use. Success in this latter venture will show the way for both the conservation and sustainable development of other threatened forest areas throughout the world.

The strength of the Commonwealth – and the fact that it is a growing force for good – is because it is an association of peoples as well as of governments. Through a whole range of non-governmental organisations – of which the Commonwealth Association of Museums is one – dedicated individuals work hard and effectively to make the world a better place. All these organisations have important roles in development; helping to raise living standards for the disadvantaged in health, education, food production and, indeed, in almost every field of human endeavour. They also assist in educating people and in fostering the friendly co-operation upon which the existence of the Commonwealth depends.

Perhaps the most important events organised by what we like to call “The People’s Commonwealth” are the Commonwealth Games, which are held every four years. The most recent games were in Malaysia last September: the first time they had been arranged in Asia and only the second time in a Commonwealth developing country (the 1966 Games were in Jamaica). The Kuala Lumpur Games were the biggest ever, with 5,500 sportspersons and team officials involved. The number of participating nations was seventy (the highest ever) and cricket, hockey, netball, rugby, squash and ten-pin bowling were included for the first time. Given that there was an estimated television audience of over 500 million, they clearly represented the most popular Commonwealth gathering the world had ever seen.

However, the importance of sport is far greater than the exciting accomplishments of high achievers at the Commonwealth Games or even at the Olympics. “Sport for all” is a compelling slogan; participation in sport is the right of everyone, especially the young. In addition to being enjoyable, sport encourages better health, teamwork and co-operation with others as well as enhancing personal dignity and self-worth. It has a vital role in developing the values and codes of conduct on which peace, democracy and good governance depend. A whole range of organisations help to foster sporting contacts between our peoples through organising hundreds if not thousands of events annually. This is a very heartening and indispensable aspect of Commonwealth activity. One thinks especially of the World Cricket Cup which commences next week, and which one could really call a Commonwealth event as all twelve participating teams come from our member countries.

At our headquarters in Marlborough House, London, the Commonwealth Foundation has the task of assisting the NGOs. I represent the Secretary-General on the Foundation’s Grants Committee and I know that my friends and colleagues in the Foundation have been very pleased to provide annual grants to the Commonwealth Association of Museums since CAM was established. They are delighted also to support this current meeting, with its aim of helping museums to play their full part in facilitating and encouraging people to engage actively in building peace, democracy and good governance. They have, like me, admired the courage and imagination of CAM in addressing difficult issues which have not always been among the top priorities of other museum organisations. Among these ground-breaking initiatives by CAM are the provision of distance learning opportunities for technicians and, even more importantly, the commitment to work closely with people from a variety of backgrounds so that communities may be enabled clearly and honestly to inform themselves and others about the totality of their histories, cultures and environments.

As Lois knows, I have on my office wall in Marlborough House a large photograph entitled “Earthrise”: a view of the earth taken from the moon by a NASA astronaut. Many of you will recall this picture; it appeared over twenty years ago in a large number of magazines. Several commentators have indicated that it is for them one of the more meaningful outcomes of the space programme, in that it serves to remind

people of the realities of “spaceship earth” and the imperative of thinking in terms of our global neighbourhood.

Whether we like it or not, we live in an age when we are increasingly an interlocked, interactive, interdependent human community sharing the global commons of a small planet which is under severe pressure on a number of environmental and other fronts. The very air we breathe is affected by the behaviour of those in other countries, over whose territories it will have passed days or perhaps only hours before it reaches us. There are many qualitative and quantitative indicators of environmental and other forms of planetary degradation. Unless we co-operate to make our world a decent and habitable place for all of us, matters are, quite frankly, going to get worse. Ask not for whom the bell tolls for, indeed, it tolls for all of us if we do not take the action necessary to solve our global problems and reverse the misery for a substantial proportion of humanity, about which the revolution in information technology has made the vast majority of us so acutely aware.

Inevitably, in the last year of the millennium, our thoughts turn to the future and to the immediate challenges ahead. Our current Secretary-General – Chief Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria – has indicated his belief that principal amongst them are the effective management of pluralism, and the proper control of the processes of globalisation so that they result in benefits for all.

Let me address firstly the issue of pluralism. With perhaps half a dozen homogenous exceptions, Commonwealth countries are characterised by cultural, ethnic and religious diversity; for which, of course, they should all be both the happier and the richer. Sadly, however, people from different backgrounds are not always able to even tolerate each other, still less live in harmony. While the Commonwealth has a relatively good record concerning such matters, it is by no means free of these difficulties.

Outside the Commonwealth, things are a lot more worrying. For example, one study indicates that between 1989 and 1992 there were eighty-two armed conflicts in the world: the vast majority in non-Commonwealth countries and no fewer than seventy-nine of them (that is 96%) within rather than between countries and linked to ethnic, religious and other differences. In the words of the great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the
Worst are full of passionate intensity.

The famous Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, used the first three words of Yeats’s poem as the title of one of his most celebrated books. They have a very modern resonance in that the horrors of divisive pluralism which we see today show us all too

clearly the drowning of innocence and the evil fruits of the misdirection of passionate intensity. The situation appears to be getting worse during the 1990s and requires urgent and appropriate action, in which the Commonwealth (and your Association as part of it) is well placed to play a helpful role.

Turning to globalisation, it is evident to all those who have access to the facts that the tendency in most countries – even the most developed ones – is for the rich to get richer and the poor poorer. This is clearly not just unsatisfactory: it is immoral and wrong and must be altered. There is also an imperative to learn the lessons of the past; to avoid actions which lead to boom and bust and to encourage those which result in sustainable growth and prosperity. These two requirements are inter-related. One of the lessons of history – which, perhaps, museums can help to teach – is that the wealth of certain sections of the world's population not only should not but cannot be sustained indefinitely amidst the impoverishment of so many.

In conclusion, I should like to reiterate that the links that bind us together as Commonwealth people are of crucial importance to our association. But we cannot fully understand these links, and help to forge new ones, unless we appreciate our own history and cultures – our own roots and branches if you like – and those of others. In this, museums have a vitally important role to play in that they are places where the history, art, science and all other aspects of communities and societies are displayed for the benefit of individual citizens.

I stress again that the Commonwealth is about people. While governments are obviously of crucial importance to us all, it is an essential aspect of democracy that they are not solely responsible for anything, including the Commonwealth. It is for people to make their wishes known; to help governments (which in democracies are, after all, the servants of the people) to be aware of our associations' still largely untapped potential to provide leadership to a confused world and to be active in giving practical expression to the principles which represent the heart and soul of the Commonwealth.

Ladies and gentlemen, your Secretary General, Lois Irvine, initially suggested that I should speak for a whole hour. I responded that, in my experience, 45 minutes was about the maximum which any audience could tolerate from even a truly distinguished speaker, let alone myself. I offered half an hour to leave more time for discussion and, I am delighted to say, she agreed. You have been kindness itself in listening to me for so long, and for inviting me to benefit from your wisdom and experience during the course of your deliberations this week.