

Council for Education in the Commonwealth

by Peter Williams

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A major challenge for the 21st century is to devise effective mechanisms for making international bodies and their activities more accountable to the world community. Good governance is required of international programmes and institutions as well as of national governments. This requires the nurturing of public interest and involvement in international affairs. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have a pivotal role in mobilising support for international co-operation, at the same time bringing to bear a critical and disinterested scrutiny of international operations, from the perspective of broad national and global public interest. One body playing such a role in a modest way in relation to Commonwealth education co-operation is the Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC).

The Council was founded in 1959 the same year as the first of the series of Commonwealth education conferences - nowadays called Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers - held in Oxford. The Council was created by a group of members of the British Parliament in the aftermath of the Oxford gathering to sustain interest in, and mobilise practical action in support of, education in Commonwealth countries.

CEC is accredited to the Commonwealth and is invited to be present at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs) and Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEMs). A strong CEC delegation will participate in the 16th CCEM and associated events in Cape Town in December 2006.

The parliamentary base

Since its establishment the Council has maintained its Westminster base, while locating its office and mailing address with a sister organisation, the League for Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers, in Clapham. It has always had joint parliamentary chairpersons and many members drawn from the main parties in Parliament. The Parliamentary Chairs have necessarily been backbench MPs who have had to resign on being promoted to Ministerial Office: whence some like Lord Thomson (George Thomson), a founder MP, have later re-emerged to become CEC Patrons in the House of Lords. Lord Thomson is joined in his present role by Baroness Chalker and Lord Judd, two distinguished former Ministers of Overseas Development. Today's Parliamentary Chairs in the House of Commons - Tim Boswell M.P. of the Conservative Party, Sally Keeble M.P. from Labour, and Simon Hughes M.P. from the Liberal Democrats - are the latest in a long line of distinguished politicians who have led the Council.

The majority of CEC meetings have been held in the Palace of Westminster, where the Houses of Commons and Lords hold their sessions, and these have included a series of biennial events hosted by the Council at which successive Commonwealth Secretaries-General have briefed members of both Houses of Parliament, Commonwealth High Commissioners and other invited guests on the outcomes of recent CHOGMs.

While this parliamentary presence lends the Council a high profile and useful access to

the policy-making echelons of government, MPs are busy people with crowded diaries. It is the 'lay' members, including particularly those on the Governing Board and its committees, who can give most time to the Council's activities. The membership is of two kinds: institutional and individual. Institutional members include universities and colleges with substantial international interests in education abroad, CSOs whose particular concerns are directed to Commonwealth affairs or the development of education overseas, and Commonwealth High Commissions in London. The individual members, in addition to members of parliament, are generally men and women who have worked in schools and colleges in other Commonwealth countries, are engaged in collaborative work with Commonwealth partners through their college or school, or who have a personal or academic interest and concern with the issues addressed by CEC.

Functions and activities of the Council

What are these issues, and what is the CEC's basic role and functions? Essentially the Council's interest is promotion of action by the appropriate authorities in support of education development in the Commonwealth. It provides a forum where experiences can be shared and issues requiring action can be aired and explored, and through which public opinion can be better informed and mobilised.

The Council is equally interested in

- education development at national and sub-regional levels in the Commonwealth;
- the Commonwealth's collective institutions and arrangements to sustain and promote education co-operation and development (e.g. the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan);
- the mobilisation of an appropriate British interest and practical contributions in support of education in other Commonwealth countries, through the aid programme and through the work of voluntary bodies and of the private sector.

The CEC pursues its concerns in these areas using six principal mechanisms

- Practical action. The Council is the sponsor of Knowledge Aid for Sierra Leone an innovative project that focuses on downloading teaching materials from the internet for adaptation and dissemination in secondary schools in Sierra Leone.
- Meetings and conferences. The Council holds half a dozen meetings every year including an Annual Conference and Annual Lecture. Major three-day Conferences were held on Education in South Africa after the attainment of majority rule in that country and on Education in Nigeria following return to civilian government.
- Working groups. These have addressed the implications of Britain's membership of the European Union for Commonwealth education; trends in Commonwealth student mobility; the sustainability of universal primary education with reference to the experiences of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia – commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat. Major published studies have resulted, including *Student Mobility on the Map* and, forthcoming in 2007, the UPE sustainability study.
- Publications and newsletters. As well as publishing the product of working groups, CEC commissioned a series of major essays to commemorate forty years of Commonwealth Education co-operation. This was published by the

Commonwealth Secretariat in 2003. There has additionally been a series of published updates on Commonwealth Student Mobility and several reports emanating from the Annual Conferences and Annual lectures. A Newsletter goes to members three times a year.

- Advocacy. The Council regularly responds to requests for the submission of views, most recently from the Commission for Africa in 2005 and the Government's 2006 White Paper on International Development. Submissions are made to the UK Government in advance of Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers and sometimes to Commonwealth Heads of Government at their biennial Meetings. CEC delegations regularly call on Ministers and officials at DfES, DFID and the FCO to press the case for action in support of education development in the Commonwealth. In the past ten years CEC delegations to five CHOGMs and four CCEMs have actively pressed the case for promoting education both in its own right and as part of wider Commonwealth agendas. The Council believes it can take some credit for Heads' of Government endorsement of education as a priority for Commonwealth action in the Aso Rock Declaration from Abuja (2003) and the Malta Communique (2005).
- Partnership with others. Sometimes it is more productive for the Council to work as part of a wider coalition of interested bodies. For this reason it is in membership of the UK Forum for International Education and Training (UKFIET). CEC has also played a leading role in establishing and supporting the Commonwealth Consortium for Education (CCfE) in 2001, a grouping which now has 23 civil society bodies and associations (including CEC) in membership with a commitment to education in the Commonwealth. Peter Williams, as well as being the CEC Joint Deputy Executive Chair is Hon. Secretary of the Consortium. CCfE produces a quarterly calendar of Commonwealth education activities and events, publishes a series of briefing notes on aspects of Commonwealth education co-operation, and a Directory of Commonwealth Education, covering the manifold organisations and programmes in this area. It undertook a major project in 2004/05 to explore the potential for Commonwealth activity in the six Action Areas identified by Ministers. The CEC organised two of the six workshops in the series, those on UPE and gender equality.

Conditions of effectiveness

Granted that the Council performs its role only imperfectly, how is it that a small voluntary organisation, with no paid staff, can take on a programme of this magnitude? Such success as the Council has had is probably attributable to four main factors. First is the interest and encouragement shown by its parliamentary chairmen, patrons and members, which give Council members a sense of optimism about the possibility of affecting important decision-making processes. Second, is the Council's wide range of contacts with key institutional and individual players in Commonwealth education co-operation, whose trust CEC has been able to win by its own evident disinterested commitment and the quality of the activities and documentation it sponsors. There is good evidence that the Commonwealth's official agencies greatly welcome the interest, support - and at times constructive criticism - that the Council offers to their work.

Third the generosity of key supporters has enabled CEC to mount a much larger programme than the resources it garners from the annual subscriptions of members, and from the occasional research contract, would on their own allow. The Council has had much-appreciated sponsorship of its Annual Conference and Annual Lecture and other key events from e.g. the British Council, the Centre for British Teachers, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, the Commonwealth of Learning, and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Prudent financial management has enabled it to remain solvent and reasonably effective when many similar organisations have buckled under the strain of attempting too much with too few resources.

Most important of all perhaps is, fourth, the commitment shown by its officers and members, particularly those elected for a three-year term to the Governing Board, which meets three times a year. The Council has been blessed by a succession of dedicated Executive Chairs in Roy Manley, Jack Thornton, Sir Roy Marshall, Professor Geoffrey Sims, Dr Anastasios Christodoulou, Mark Robinson and now Valerie Davey. In the Secretary's seat David Daniel, Trevor Bottomley and currently Kees Maxey have devoted considerable personal time, without remuneration, to making the Council 'tick'. Their efforts and the complementary inputs of other officers have sustained a programme and momentum that many organisations of similar nominal size would envy.

So long as the Commonwealth exists and continues to flourish, CEC's mission can never be finally accomplished. The quality of education that the majority of Commonwealth citizens receive is depressingly inadequate, and should be a continuing affront to the more affluent minority. The funds that Commonwealth governments are willing to commit to education co-operation in the Commonwealth are woefully limited in relation to need and opportunity, and there is a constant threat of cutbacks that will only be averted if influential sections of the Commonwealth community show they actively care.

The CEC will continue to play its small part in promoting a positive response to these challenges and will welcome allies and partners from bodies with a similar agenda in other Commonwealth countries. There is surely scope for 'councils for education in the Commonwealth' to spring up in other capitals and major cities of the Commonwealth, drawing in the politicians, Commonwealth scholars and other students from abroad, visiting Commonwealth teachers, institutions linked with Commonwealth partners abroad. The CEC in Britain looks forward to working with sister institutions, wherever they exist, for the cause of a better education for all the peoples of the Commonwealth.