

Opening Remarks by George Thomson

Lord Thomson of Monifieth (George Thomson), Founder-Patron of CEC recalled the considerations that had prompted him, then an Opposition Labour MP, to work with parliamentary colleagues to establish CEC in 1959, soon after the First Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford. It was the era of African Independence and new countries were desperately short of the skills needed to run their administration and for promotion of development. CEC was created in response to those needs and as a forum through which education professionals and politicians could work together for international education development– an essential partnership that was still of critical relevance today.

When Nyasaland was about to become independent as Malawi he asked the Conservative Minister about the number of university graduates that country possessed. The answer was less than 50 and it turned out that virtually all of them were in gaol!

A few years later he was a member of the Labour Government and served as the last Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations in the period when the Commonwealth Secretariat was formed. He had warm memories of Commonwealth meetings at Marlborough House on subjects like Rhodesian UDI and the comradeship that prevailed in the corridors even when there were sharp differences of opinion at the conference table. Later he had gone on to become the first UK Commissioner to the European Community in Brussels.

Looking back on his experience of public affairs Lord Thomson said it had convinced him that the Commonwealth would fail if it was seen as no more than a political organisation. It was an association of peoples and the educational cultural and social dimensions of Commonwealth relations that CEC strove to promote remained central to its future.

Influencing Policy

Tim Boswell, MP for Daventry and Parliamentary Chairperson, CEC

Tim Boswell drew attention to a series of ambiguities and distinctions in the subject matter he had been asked to address. He first pointed to the distinction between trying to influence the stance of Commonwealth multilateral institutions on the one hand, and the conduct of intergovernmental bilateral relationships in the Commonwealth on the other.

Then there was a tension in education policy between promotion of education for its own sake and education as an instrument for development. As a classicist turned development economist Tim Boswell himself was particularly aware of this tension

In his own view the professional relationships on a one-to-one basis lay at the heart of education co-operation in the Commonwealth. People might legitimately look to Government to encourage and facilitate these ties, including by provision of resources; but Governments

links could not replace professional collaboration. On the other hand, if professional bodies wanted to 'add value,' their efforts would best be targeted on areas and issues that Commonwealth Ministers were focused on.

In trying to advance Commonwealth education from a UK base, one was faced with a duality of approach from relevant Government departments. DFID had a clear role in providing development aid for the alleviation of poverty, and there were education dimensions to this. On the other hand DfES had a traditionally regulatory role in relation to UK education and had never really 'done' abroad. It was greatly to the credit of Charles Clarke that he had shown that abroad was relevant to UK's education agendas and that it mattered. It was important for other countries in the Commonwealth to come to the same conclusion if there was to be fruitful dialogue and co-operation.

A major challenge for CEC was to persuade domestic politicians to engage with abroad and to see that educational progress in other countries was conducive to our own interests. The agenda should not just be about aid for development but also about inculcating fundamental values and producing good citizens with an understanding of interdependence and diversity in the world and empathy for the situation and aspirations of others.

The development of communications and the relative cheapness of the new technologies opened up tremendous opportunity. People should not fear globalisation: the challenge was to manage it.

Two major challenges for bodies like CEC were therefore to persuade governments to take an interest in international education co-operation: and to be selective in terms of messages and targets, keeping these focused and simple.

David Levesque, Senior Education Adviser DFID

1. Policy Shifts in Development Co-operation

David Levesque drew attention to several distinct phases in UK assistance to overseas, primarily Commonwealth, education development, and suggested things had come full circle:

- 1930s in the then colonies. Country-led development and budget support
- 1950s and 1960s following Independence. Manpower considerations to the fore
- 1970s, Callaghan Government. Move away from general support to a project focus. An interest in accountability and results-based programmes.
- 1980s and 1990s under Conservative Governments. Development falls under FCO and suffers declining budgets. Aid-trade relationship prominent
- late 1990s. Poverty-reduction focus. In education post-Jomtien primary education to the fore.
- Current decade, back to country-led development and budget support (see 1930s!).

What accounted for these shifts in policy? Clearly the policies were made by people and some of them were very strong personalities like Clare Short.

2. Influences on DFID

Looking at current influences on the policies of DFID, as a department of a Commonwealth Government, David Levesque identified the following:

1. Legislation. The Development Act was a powerful tool providing a strong framework for activity
2. Ministers and Ministerial support. In addition to two strong long-serving Ministers in Clare Short and Hilary Benn, the interest and support of the Prime Minister and Chancellor had been invaluable in securing the commitment of £8.5bn over ten years for education co-operation.
3. Harmonisation with other donors. DFID worked collaboratively with other bilateral donors and multilateral institutions, having signed up to the Paris Declaration. Among the UK's international collaborators the Commonwealth was not necessarily seen as a significant development partner in meeting the MDGs: sometimes there was a tendency to see it as an old colonial club.
4. Multilateral perspectives and obligations through the World Bank, OECD, EC, etc
5. Knowledge and information often generated by new research studies
6. Public Opinion, as orchestrated through big campaigns like Jubilee Debt and Make Poverty History, expressed through the Press, and identified by opinion surveys etc
7. Crises and Humanitarian responses to e.g. HIV/AIDS, natural disasters etc

3. Ways for NGOs to influence government policy.

- The first essential was to be well informed and to keep up to date. This involved being familiar with White Papers, other policy documents, the content of international agreements, reports and initiatives like the G8, Commission for Africa, UN reform efforts, the MDGs
- Civil society organisations needed to be focused with a clear message.
- Avoid fragmentation. The Commonwealth spoke with too many different voices, reflecting the multiplicity of Commonwealth bodies which tended to make it difficult for Ministers to respond. Could they not speak with a more united voice?
- By addressing Ministers' own concerns and development priorities, and showing how one could work with them to serve their purposes, providing something governments valued, one could often unlock doors that would be shut if NGOs were perceived as simply pursuing their own hobby horse
- Hold government to account. Related to the first point above, NGOs could usefully monitor Government actions in relation to its pledges and promises, and draw attention to departures and lapses from commitments.
- One should look for different entry points to attract attention of Ministers and impact on policy
- By joining coalitions like the Global Campaign for Education or BOND, one might get better access to Ministers since these representative coalition could more easily obtain a regular hearing

4. Some additional strategies

David Levesque pointed out that DFID was not the only department relevant to the UK's education and cultural relations with the Commonwealth. DfES and the FCO had interests and responsibilities as well. These government departments should be targeted where appropriate as well as DFID. (FCO, DfES, DFID) Are Commonwealth agencies adding to DFID's agenda?

Second it was important to work with Commonwealth wide agencies like the Secretariat, COL, CSFP

Finally, David Levesque underscored a point made earlier that it was important to avoid fragmentation. The Commonwealth needed a common voice, rather than a multiplicity of agencies all promoting their individual interests.

Selected Points arising in Discussion

In discussion the following points arose, some made by the Chair and speakers, others from the floor

- ❖ DFID had a much larger budget for education co-operation but was cutting down on its professional capacity. DfES also suffered from a dearth of professionals with international experience. This was a matter for deep concern
- ❖ Dialogue with the political opposition parties at their conferences and policy groups framing manifesto commitments could be productive. Don't just lobby Government
- ❖ CEC should attempt to build closer links with CW Parliamentary Association which tended to be rather inward looking. CPA was an important potential partner in attempts to get other CW governments to take education, and CW education cooperation, seriously.
- ❖ A useful tactical device was to copy other Ministers and Departments in to correspondence.
- ❖ The development of communications was making it possible for schools and communities to link across to counterparts in other CW countries. This was a good entry point for capturing MPs' interest in CW connections and activity if they could see it was important to their own constituents.