

Critical Champions: Civil Society and Commonwealth Education

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ABSTRACT *The Commonwealth is rooted in past movement of peoples and in present-day links between individuals and institutions. The health of the ‘Commonwealth of states’ depends on the concurrent existence of a vibrant ‘Commonwealth of peoples’; but human development is accorded low priority in Commonwealth agendas and the official Commonwealth, while publicly acknowledging civil society’s importance, has largely neglected the challenge of raising awareness of and interest in the Commonwealth among ordinary people. Commonwealth associations are potential allies in tackling this task. They are particularly numerous in the education sector, which has more extensive Commonwealth co-operative networks than any other, even though some organisations have faded away. The record of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, now in its 50th year, demonstrates the value to the Commonwealth of having among its collaborators critical champions of its work.*

KEY WORDS: civil society, Council for Education in the Commonwealth, Commonwealth Consortium for Education, Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, Commonwealth People’s Forum, education about the Commonwealth

Introduction

The present-day Commonwealth is rooted in the movement of peoples. In the past these included migrants, merchants and missionaries; soldiers, sailors, settlers and slaves. Colonial administrators and indentured labour could be added to these alliterative lists. Their contemporary counterparts—those who feel comfortable today moving between one Commonwealth country and another—include spouses, students, contract workers, professional employees of large corporations, voluntary organisations and international aid agencies; and, sadly, refugees from conflicts and natural disasters. This human migration has left in its wake both a significant cultural legacy in what Shridath Ramphal has often referred to as the ‘three golden threads’ in the Commonwealth tapestry of language, law and learning,¹ as well as a physical legacy of sizeable diasporas of Britons, Indians, Nigerians and the rest. Symbolising the personal nature of Commonwealth links is the position of the

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British crown: its wearer was once monarch presiding over an Empire, and is now Head of a Commonwealth of independent peoples and states.

Arising out of this past are continuing institutional manifestations of the Commonwealth's cultural and human foundations. These take the form in some countries of preferential treatment on passports and visas, or of the right to residence and to participate in elections. There are shared sporting events and interests such as the Commonwealth Games and a passion in many countries for the predominantly 'Commonwealth sports' of cricket and rugby; and several Commonwealth prize competitions in the arts. Some 70 civil society bodies—associations of institutions and professional organisations—bear the Commonwealth's name and are accredited to the Commonwealth. Backstopping much of the activity of the unofficial Commonwealth, the 'Commonwealth of peoples', is the Commonwealth Foundation, created in 1965.

The official Commonwealth, the 'Commonwealth of states', is serviced by three principal agencies—the Commonwealth Secretariat with its Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC), the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning—and tends to be more in the spotlight. Meetings of Heads of Government, attended by the Queen, naturally command media attention, especially if a contentious world issue is on the agenda; and this Commonwealth of states, with its prestigious headquarters at Marlborough House in London and its public-relations apparatus, gains further natural advantage over the Commonwealth of peoples from the holding of periodic ministerial meetings or from high-profile mediation in international disputes and other interventions by the Secretary General. By contrast, the two-week period occupied by the Commonwealth Games once every four years is perhaps the only major occasion when the Commonwealth of peoples itself enjoys the full glare of media publicity.

In the final resort the Commonwealth of states would wither without the underpinning provided by a vibrant Commonwealth of peoples. This danger may seem less apparent in small Commonwealth states, such as those clustered in the Caribbean and the Pacific, which find the Commonwealth umbrella usefully protective of their concerns and which value the greater ease of dealing with international affairs that Commonwealth membership affords them; but political leaders in large and middle-size countries might well start to question the point of Commonwealth membership if they could not identify any positive sense of affinity and Commonwealth 'belonging' among those who elect them.

At the strategic level of thinking about the Commonwealth's long-term future, the need for conscious nurturing of the people's Commonwealth by supporting people-to-people and institution-linking networks and by investing in education about the Commonwealth may seem only too obvious. In the short-term actuality of Commonwealth Secretariat budget decisions, however, these agendas get very short shrift. In spite of the roots of the Commonwealth being in the movement of peoples, and of the centrality of human development and institutional networks to the fabric of the Commonwealth, the Secretariat has always treated these themes as 'orphans'.² Its attention is concentrated on politics/diplomacy and economics/trade/aid. No doubt in sanctioning this, Commonwealth Secretaries-General have felt themselves to be reflecting accurately the priorities of Governments. Even if their judgement were to be questioned, there is little possibility of change so long as two conditions

persist. The first is that the Commonwealth Secretariat remains exclusively directed by individuals coming from a diplomatic and economics background and the government representatives deciding its priorities and budgets are people of the same ilk—scarcely an educator, sociologist or scientist among them. The second is that the Commonwealth—that avowed champion of democracy, transparency and accountability—itself continues to lack any democratic and transparent forums where priorities and possibilities can be openly debated.

The practical consequences for the Commonwealth association of undervaluing science, the professions and institutional networks can be serious:

- Can the Commonwealth credibly address climate change and sustainable development, or comfortably adopt ‘Science, Technology and Society’ as its theme for Commonwealth Day (and year) in 2010, without appropriate institutional machinery for scientific collaboration between member countries? To the dismay of many, it quite deliberately disbanded its purpose-built vehicle for science co-operation, the Commonwealth Science Council, only five years ago in 2004.
- The Secretariat must bear much of the responsibility for the rather sorry state of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), having undervalued it in the past and failed to fulfil its own responsibilities for ensuring that the Plan engages the participation and support of all members. The Secretariat has neglected in recent years to monitor, report and promote the Plan or to provide the necessary back-up to the operating agencies in member countries. These duties have instead been shuffled off on to the officers at the Association of Commonwealth Universities charged with servicing the UK Commonwealth Scholarship Commission. They have done an admirable job, but the 2009 failure of the Plan to reach the targets set by ministers in 2006 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007a) cannot be laid at their door: the task of negotiating with the Governments that adopted the target then, the means of implementing it in the ensuing three years, belongs firmly to the Secretariat. Many in Marlborough House seem unaware of the Plan’s scale or, for example, that the UK spends more each year on Commonwealth Scholarships than on the Secretariat, CFTC, Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth of Learning combined.³ Nor apparently are they conscious of the potential asset for Commonwealth co-operation that the Plan’s 25,000 alumni and alumnae represent.
- Education about the Commonwealth has been allowed to wither in the absence of any substantial interest and support from official Commonwealth agencies. When the Commonwealth Institute decided to transform itself into a body of a different kind (the Commonwealth Education Trust) no serious consideration was given by Commonwealth governments or their secretariat to allocation of responsibilities and resources for carrying forward and developing its mission of promoting Commonwealth awareness and identity, particularly among the young. Prior to the demise of such activity by the Commonwealth Institute, one condition for establishing a Commission on Commonwealth Studies in 1995 was that the Chair and members should themselves undertake the necessary fundraising for its operating budget—which they did! After the Commission reported in 1996, no allocation of funds was made to implement its widely praised conclusions and recommendations (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996).

Commonwealth Civil Society

The Commonwealth claims with some justification to be a champion of civil society. One basis for this is the farsighted and somewhat remarkable decision as early as 1965 to establish the Commonwealth Foundation to operate alongside the Secretariat and to orchestrate interchange and co-operation at non-government level. A second is the Commonwealth's commitment to democracy and wide participation in governance involving the dispersion of power in society, encouragement of countervailing (to government) centres of influence, active engagement by citizens in the management of affairs and assumption of responsibility for local developments, and the ability of the general public to express their collective voices on the issues of the day. At national level Commonwealth countries are home to some remarkable examples of enterprising development activity undertaken by non-government organisations—and not just in more developed countries, as is illustrated by the outstanding cases of the Grameen Bank and BRAC in Bangladesh.⁴ A common element in the cultures of Commonwealth countries is the prominent place that voluntary organisations occupy.

At the same time there is a certain ambivalence in governments' attitudes to civil society. This is particularly evident in those developing countries where national statehood is a comparatively recent phenomenon, and where local non-government organisations (NGOs) have had insufficient time to put down deep roots. Here the most prominent civil society organisations (CSOs) may be receiving considerable injections of resources from a parent international NGO that is in turn substantially funded by a national development-assistance agency in the rich country where it is based. In these cases local CSOs may appear to be Trojan horses for external influence and, especially where they engage in advocacy in relation to government policy, may become the object of deep suspicion. An additional source of potential resentment arises when CSOs, whether or not dependent on external finance, claim in some way to represent the authentic voice of the people. Governments that have been voted into power through democratic elections open to participation of the entire population are understandably irritated by the claims of NGOs with small support bases, and in some cases undemocratic constitutions, to 'speak for the people'. For all these reasons there may inevitably be an underlying tension, sometimes overt and sometimes unstated, when consultations between Governments and CSO representatives take place in formal Commonwealth settings.

It is one thing to proclaim the importance of civil society involvement in Commonwealth affairs, and quite another to give it actual expression. Who in fact should represent 'civil society' in Commonwealth contexts, for example? This is a practical issue for the Commonwealth Foundation when it constitutes its civil society advisory committee and invites participation in the Commonwealth People's Forums that take place biennially in advance of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs), or for example in the Stakeholder Forum in advance of the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers. Together, the Foundation and the Secretariat regularly have to consider the criteria for accreditation to Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings and attendance at the biannual consultations with civil society that have taken place in recent years at Marlborough House.

Thus far the tendency has been to draw representation from two main groups. First, there are national and regional, sometimes global, 'grassroots organisations' and, second, Commonwealth voluntary and professional organisations and associations. These are two somewhat uneasy bedfellows, differing sharply in character. The first group consists mainly of activists, often in early or mid-career and receiving ungenerous salaries or in paid consultancy, drawn from organisations including community associations and welfare bodies, that campaign for public action on such issues as equality of women, the disabled, human rights and combating HIV/AIDS. Though given a special place in Commonwealth councils, this group may sometimes be quite ill-informed about the Commonwealth and its potential, and how its infrastructure of agendas, programmes and budgets actually operates.

Commonwealth professional and voluntary bodies embrace a wide variety of organisations. Many are membership associations in professional fields such as architecture, broadcasting, educational management, engineering, law, nursing, social work, surveying, etc. and have members all over the Commonwealth; but the group also includes institutions of a distinctively different character, for example the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, the Royal Commonwealth Society and Royal Overseas League: and the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, which is the focus of a later more detailed section of this article. Bodies belonging to this group generally have a dual agenda, first of promoting development and innovation in their field of interest, and second of supporting and advancing relevant Commonwealth collective activity. A disproportionate number of their representatives/officers tend to have British nationality, reflecting the location, in the majority (perhaps 70%) of cases, of their organisations' headquarters in London. These too are activists, but tend to be older ones, often with working experience in more than one Commonwealth country, and in many cases now in retirement and offering their services as volunteers. About 20 of these 70–80 accredited organisations receive grants towards their core budgets from the Commonwealth Foundation. Roughly a fifth of the total is located in the education sector, but several others operate education and training programmes in their particular discipline.

If Commonwealth civil society is to operate effectively, it needs a constructive alliance between these two groups, the grassroots organisations and the professional organisations, given the complementary nature of their strengths and interests. If there is too exclusive a focus on the grassroots, then Commonwealth knowledge and commitment may be deficient—resulting in the issue of statements and recommendations that are worthy but too general to be 'actionable' by Commonwealth governments and institutions. Yet over-reliance on the Commonwealth professional associations produces a CSO group that, generally speaking, is insufficiently in touch with younger generations and may be unrepresentative of the plurality of Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations can perhaps help with the dual task of promoting a better knowledge among key grassroots CSOs of the Commonwealth and its modes of working; and second of assisting accredited Commonwealth associations to extend their reach and membership to wider age groups and more countries. Surely too there is scope for CSOs in these two constituencies to assist

one another in meeting these challenges, with the Commonwealth Foundation acting as matchmaker.

These two constituencies tend to predominate in the civil society that the Commonwealth addresses through its consultations, but they do not begin to encompass the whole of Commonwealth civil society. Important faith groups and youth organisations also need to be taken into account—and the Foundation to its credit is trying to reach out to them. Beyond lies a range of sporting and recreational groups, cultural associations, trades unions and co-operatives, intellectual movements and think-tanks, research associations, credit unions and consumer groups, and charitable bodies. Many of these do not appear to find their proper place in recognised ‘Commonwealth civil society’, which in consequence is much less representative than it should be and is deprived of important voices.

Commonwealth agencies could usefully invest more effort in harnessing civil society’s potential in ways that will both promote development and strengthen Commonwealth ties, in particular encouraging the development of Commonwealth associations in new areas.

Mobilising Support for the Commonwealth

Friends of the Commonwealth frequently express concern over the apparent indifference with which it is regarded among the populations of member countries. Various explanations are offered for this state of affairs. Some focus on possible reasons why the Commonwealth is not of more intrinsic interest to the public and does not command more popular support, whereas others see the issue as a communications problem and identify a failure of information and education strategies.

Among the possible reasons for overall lack of interest are:

- The Commonwealth is said to be a relic of the past and, as the British Empire in disguise, irrelevant to the 21st century world.
- The Commonwealth is not the mechanism through which individual countries pursue their own vital economic and security interests. Most countries do that through regional trade groups, bilateral deals with major donors and the Bretton Woods institutions, commercial agreements with multinational corporations, and defence pacts with the superpowers.
- Member states invest so little in Commonwealth institutions and programmes that with only a few exceptions their profile is insignificant by comparison with those of other multilateral and bilateral agencies.
- The centralisation and geographical concentration of Commonwealth institutions in London deprives potential supporters of the opportunity to become familiar with Commonwealth activity and Commonwealth leadership. The Commonwealth does not have any ambassadors, resident representatives, or offices in the capital cities of member countries. How can it but seem remote to the populations of member countries? Is it surprising they still incorrectly refer to the ‘British’ Commonwealth, when so many Commonwealth institutions are clustered in Britain’s capital and the British monarch is the Commonwealth’s recognised Head?

- A curious anomaly is that an association claiming to stand for good governance lacks its own mechanisms for public scrutiny and accountability. There is no Commonwealth Parliament or other formal democratic machinery to monitor its performance and to argue about its priorities. How can its friends or foes participate in discussions of its work, its virtues and its defects? Conversely, through what channels can Commonwealth agencies encounter informed and constructive commentary on their performance and priorities from those who wish them well but yearn for them to do better? Their principal sounding boards at present consist of civil servants in member countries. Unfortunately their brief from home appears to be that they should endeavour to restrict Commonwealth collective activities and expenditures to the essential minimum.

In addressing these challenges, attention switches to the means through which interest and support might be encouraged.

- The Commonwealth itself should invest more in public relations and information. It has not taken the task of projecting itself sufficiently seriously in spite of the preparation of important reports suggesting possible strategies, such as that by Derek Ingram (1997). Education about the Commonwealth and its value is nobody's 'baby'. Instead of it being a mainstream responsibility of some Commonwealth agency or programme to draw up and implement an overall strategy, or to devise a syllabus and materials that would excite the interest of learners, there are just a few scattered and disconnected small-scale initiatives operated by many different agencies. In many Commonwealth capital cities Commonwealth Day on the second Monday in March is celebrated in a very perfunctory fashion, or not at all.

Where might the Commonwealth turn for support? Where are the champions of the Commonwealth itself and of the causes it embraces? The monarchy is one major 'player' but by convention its public voice is muted. Among Commonwealth Heads of Government and political leaders, a readiness of individuals to engage with the Commonwealth appears to depend largely on past experiences and current interests at the personal level. Some business and commercial interests coalesce around the Commonwealth cause through the Commonwealth Business Council, and the Commonwealth Business Forums that run parallel to the CHOGMs are generally well attended. It is difficult nevertheless to identify any clear business agenda for strengthening the influence of the Commonwealth or its institutions.

Diaspora communities whose origins so often lie in Commonwealth connections should be major advocates for the maintenance of Commonwealth ties, but little has been done to tap this possible source of interest and support. Another potential support group are the beneficiaries from Commonwealth programmes of awards and technical assistance. Commonwealth Scholars have been mentioned as a case in point, and in Britain the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission has recently made great efforts to promote Commonwealth awareness among CSFP award-holders and to inculcate in them a sense of membership of a community to which all award-holders belong.

A key constituency that is positioned to champion the Commonwealth and Commonwealth co-operation, and that does perform the task more or less well, is the group of civil society bodies accredited to the Commonwealth. One of them, the Royal Commonwealth Society, has recently in 2009 sponsored a striking new initiative, the online 'Commonwealth Conversation', which encourages the publics of Commonwealth member states to share their perceptions of the Commonwealth and of the agendas it could usefully address.⁵

The education sector usefully illustrates the role of civil society in Commonwealth educational co-operation and will be considered in more detail.

Commonwealth Civil Society and the Official Commonwealth: Education Sector Experience

Education has always been one of the leading sectors of functional co-operation in the Commonwealth. The depth and breadth of infrastructure education are unparalleled elsewhere. This applies both to co-operation between governments and to civil society.

Commonwealth educational co-operation has a long history. In the pre-Commonwealth days of Empire, the Imperial Institute, later the Commonwealth Institute, was created in 1887 with a remit initially in the areas of scientific research and promotion of industrial and commercial development in the Empire (it assumed its education mantle in the 1950s). The League for Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers and Association of Commonwealth Universities were originally founded in 1901 and 1913, respectively. On the official front early Imperial Education Conferences were held in 1911, 1923 and 1927.

In 1959 the first Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford inaugurated a new era of education co-operation in the Commonwealth. It set in train the current series of 17 intergovernmental conferences, held triennially. The first eight up to 1980 were designated as 'Commonwealth Education Conferences', and the next nine from 1984 onwards as 'Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers', up to and including the 17th Conference (17 CCEM) held in Kuala Lumpur in June 2009. The first Conference in Oxford also decided on the establishment of a Commonwealth Education Liaison Unit to facilitate intergovernmental educational co-operation and this unit opened its doors at Marlborough House in 1960, thus antedating the Commonwealth Secretariat by five years. The Unit was absorbed into the Secretariat in 1965, initially forming one of its constituent divisions and later continuing under different nomenclature as the Education Programme, or as today's Education Section of the Social Transformation Programmes Division.

Since 1965 education has steadily lost ground to political and economic concerns in the Commonwealth Secretariat's own internal organisation, in spite of the very prominent place it occupies in the Commonwealth's overall infrastructure for co-operation at both intergovernmental and non-governmental levels. Nevertheless, after a curious 'wobble' when the Report of the High Level Group to the Coolom CHOGM in 2002 unaccountably failed even to mention education as a central Commonwealth concern,⁶ Heads of Government have affirmed in their most recent communiqués (Abuja, Valletta, Kampala) the priority that education commands in the Commonwealth's ongoing work. For example:

education, whether formal or informal, is central to development in any society and is of the highest priority to the Commonwealth. In an increasingly divided and insecure world, education must play a crucial role for people, both young and old, to optimise their opportunities and to bridge divides. (Abuja, 2003, para. 16, from Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007a)

(Heads) affirmed the centrality of education to development and democracy, as it provides the foundation for realising broader Commonwealth political, economic and social objectives. They ... encouraged all governments to allocate the resources necessary to meet the education MDGs ... (Valletta, 2005, para. 81, from Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007a)

(Heads) reaffirmed the fundamental role played by education in facilitating social and economic transformation ... Heads committed to redoubling their efforts to deliver education for all, with a particular focus on enrolling the 30 million primary school aged children out of school across the Commonwealth ... (Kampala, 2007, paras 61–62, from Commonwealth Secretariat, 2008)

Education continues to be a major beneficiary of assistance through the Secretariat's Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, accounting for £1m of expenditure between 2005 and 2007, but this does not include contracts to higher education institutions for consultancies, training and research primarily for the benefit of other sectors. On the official side one of the three Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) is the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), established in 1988 and based in Vancouver. COL falls completely within the education sector, even though it applies a good proportion of its energies and resources to promoting the application of new technologies to human resource development in other sectors, such as health and agriculture, and to ways in which new learning approaches, using modern technologies, can advance Commonwealth agendas in relation to the promotion of good governance and addressing climate change. Another IGO, the Commonwealth Foundation, has programmes concerned with the advancement of girls' education and education for peace-building and conflict resolution. It has provided core budget support to the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) and the Commonwealth Association for Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators (CASTME) among others, and programme support for specific activities to others in the education sector. Its current Chair, Simone de Comarmond, is a former Minister of Education from Seychelles and is the current Chair of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

Since 1959 co-operation in education between the 'Commonwealth of states' and the 'Commonwealth of peoples' has taken a number of different forms. The Secretariat, Foundation and COL have engaged in various kinds of collaboration with Commonwealth civil society and its structured organisations, especially with the associations accredited to the Commonwealth.

Particular challenges arise for professional educators wishing to engage directly in Commonwealth co-operation activities and networks. First, education is a mainly public sector activity in most Commonwealth countries, with the great majority of

professional education personnel being employed not directly by the central government but by state and local authorities or by school boards under their supervision, by universities and colleges, and by parastatal organisations. Educators are not an independent self-employed body of workers. Moreover, partly reflecting its public sector location, education has always struggled to establish its independent professional identity through controlled access to certification and practice, its own disciplinary codes, etc. Teachers tend to be organised into trade unions and sometimes subject associations, but not normally into strong professional collegiate groups. Third, teaching is nowadays not one of the best paid occupations. The consequence of these three factors is that teachers and other education professionals have difficulty in emulating professions such as doctors or lawyers in forming strong self-financing professional organisations across the Commonwealth, with individual members able to pay their own way to international professional conferences. So although school teachers form the largest professional group in the Commonwealth, few classroom teachers or heads are active in Commonwealth associations. It seems likely that the recently formed Commonwealth Teachers Group will mobilise them only in so far as they are active in teacher unions.

In the early days of education co-operation, at the first Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford and immediately afterwards, there was a greater degree of engagement of professional educators in Commonwealth official deliberations than was the case later. That Oxford Conference, contrary to popular belief (even the communiqué of the 17 CCEM in Malaysia perpetuated this error), was not a Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers at all—none attended!—but of officials and academics. At succeeding Commonwealth Education Conferences and CCEMs there continued to be an infusion of vice-chancellors and senior education professionals in country delegations alongside ministers (who started attending these gatherings in 1962 in New Delhi) and civil servants: and they played a further prominent part in pan-Commonwealth deliberations through attendance, again as part of country delegations, at the series of seven specialist conferences that took place mid-way between successive Commonwealth Education Conferences from 1961 to 1980.

As Commonwealth membership grew, however, large delegations (apart from the host country) were discouraged. Increasingly, the country delegations became confined, by their own choice, mainly to ministers and senior civil servants. Under Secretary General Ramphal's leadership the 9th Conference in Cyprus in 1984 (9 CCEM) marked something of a watershed in the transition from large lengthy gatherings with a heavy professional input to shorter more streamlined essentially 'political' conferences. The re-designation of the meetings thenceforward as 'CCEMs' symbolised the change.

The diminishing number of 'unofficials' on country delegations was partially offset by inviting a number of relevant civil society organisations and international agencies, selected by the Commonwealth Education Liaison Committee, to send observer delegations to the CCEMs. Observer status permitted civil society representatives to sit in on ministers' discussions, but not themselves to speak in plenaries unless specifically invited to do so—but this restriction was lifted for ministerial working groups. The observers could also make formal written representations to ministers in advance of the Conferences and have access to

ministers and officials in social functions during them. By and large this system has continued to the present day. Accredited Commonwealth associations in education benefit from and value these arrangements even if they complain at the weak facilitation and support normally afforded to them by the official Commonwealth organising team and host-country organisers; and in 17 CCEM at the unprecedented decision to exclude them from the ministers' session discussing the communiqué—with ill effects in the opinion of many on the quality of the document, and a possible contributory factor to the unexplained failure of ministers, in the 50th anniversary year of educational co-operation, to send any message about education to Heads of Government.

Since 1997 the civil society presence at the CCEM venue has been bolstered by the device of parallel meetings whose participants convene to discuss a theme related to, or identical with, that of the ministerial discussions. In 1997 in Gaborone (13 CCEM) there was just one Parallel Forum together with an exhibition; in Halifax in 2000 a Youth Forum was added, in Cape Town (16 CCEM) a Teachers' Forum, and in Kuala Lumpur (17 CCEM) a Vice-Chancellors' Forum. The forums are given a formal opportunity to present their findings to ministers, and forum members also interact with ministers at social functions.

The experience with the parallel forums has had many positive aspects. It opens up to civil society groups beyond the Commonwealth associations the possibility of interchange with ministers and government delegations. Participants have valued the contacts with each other and ministers. Most of the forums have been well attended, though there is uncertainty about whether the general civil society forum—now rechristened the 'Stakeholder Forum'—can easily fill its places if teachers and vice-chancellors are meeting separately and drawing off potential participants. However, the management and co-ordination of this complex series of events has put considerable strain on the Conference organisers and requires extensive physical facilities. The last four hosts of the CCEMs—Canada, UK, South Africa and Malaysia—have had at their disposal resources and venues quite capable of accommodating such a large gathering. By contrast, the next two CCEMs in 2012 and 2015 will be hosted by much smaller states (Bahamas and Mauritius) who may find it challenging to provide amenities on the same scale.

A further fundamental issue is whether the parallel forums can enhance the work of ministers and contribute to strengthening Commonwealth educational co-operation. In Kuala Lumpur in 2009 some civil society organisers, particularly but not only the vice-chancellors, were frustrated that the ministers did not adequately reflect in their official communiqué the concerns that civil society forums had expressed. On the other hand, examination of the various communiqués from the forums must raise doubts over how well briefed their authors were about Commonwealth education programmes and how committed they are to strengthening Commonwealth educational interchange and partnerships, or indeed the Commonwealth itself. Given a 'blind tasting' of these documents, an independent scrutineer would be hard pressed to identify them as having emanated from a Commonwealth stable. This is a rather curious outcome, given that the Stakeholder Forum was managed by the Commonwealth Foundation, and two of the other three forums were managed by Commonwealth associations—the Vice-Chancellors' Forum by the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the Teachers' Forum

by the Commonwealth Teachers' Group. It seems clear that Commonwealth civil society has still to get its act together.

Some 70 Commonwealth associations are accredited to the Commonwealth and about one in five is located in the education sector, as mentioned above. A further 10 or 12 have education and training functions included in a wider remit of activities. Many of these bodies work together through the Commonwealth Consortium for Education (CCfE), founded in 2001, which is the largest sectoral grouping of Commonwealth CSOs. Currently, 23 pan-Commonwealth organisations belong to the Consortium, 20 of them formally accredited to the Commonwealth. They include the largest of all the organisations with accredited status, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, which has some 500 universities in membership and employs nearly 40 staff.

The CCfE describes its aims as being to:

- promote the development of education throughout the Commonwealth;
- contribute views and insights to the formulation of policies on Commonwealth educational co-operation;
- assist Commonwealth intergovernmental agencies to draw on NGO resources and expertise;
- develop and disseminate models of good practice in education;
- constitute a forum that will promote co-operation by members.

So far its activities have included: the convening of triennial conferences on the eve of ministers' conferences and addressing subjects high on ministerial agendas; lobbying to maintain and strengthen the education functions of the Commonwealth Secretariat; advocacy with Commonwealth governments, including in particular trying to encourage them to see basic education aims in terms of Education for All rather than the narrower Millennium Development goals (MDGs), and to address levels and types of education beyond primary schooling; publishing a *Directory of Commonwealth Education* (Commonwealth Consortium for Education, 2009) and briefing papers on aspects of Commonwealth education co-operation; and helping members to interact more effectively with Commonwealth intergovernmental bodies and to co-ordinate their activities in the CCEMs and Heads of Government Meetings.

Although the Consortium has some real achievements to its credit and is sometimes held up as a model to other sectoral groups of associations, it is all too easy to exaggerate its capacity and influence. It has no paid staff and a tiny regular income from subscriptions. To perform effectively the tasks that its terms of reference demand, the Consortium would need a budget 100 times as large as it actually has at its disposal, so as to be able to operate an office and a small cadre of paid staff. Unfortunately revenues of as much as £100,000 and more a year are, in the present climate, only likely to be obtainable by undertaking project work and by making a surplus on it, and this would in its turn necessitate expanding the infrastructure still further.

The Consortium can be no stronger than its members, moreover. Some, such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), are substantial bodies but many others are tiny organisations, themselves relying entirely on voluntary staff.

A number of Commonwealth organisations in education have drawn in their horns in recent years and the former Commonwealth Association for the Education and Training of Adults, the Commonwealth Linking Trust, and the Federation of Commonwealth Open and Distant Learning Associations have disappeared altogether.

Smallness and modesty of resources do not necessarily spell doom, however, as a glance at the record of the CEC demonstrates.

The Council for Education in the Commonwealth 1959–2009

The CEC is a membership organisation, enrolling both individuals and institutions. Commonwealth high commissions in London are all in honorary membership, and their education attachés and student advisers find useful the contacts that CEC's programme of activities offers. The Council's purpose is described as being "to create an informed public opinion on the salient issues concerning education in the Commonwealth, and to identify appropriate ways in which Britain—independently, as a member of the European Union, and through Commonwealth and other multilateral organisations—can best contribute to Commonwealth educational development". Its activities include public meetings and lectures, working groups and reports, parliamentary briefings and submissions both to the British Government in particular and to Commonwealth governments more generally. It also sponsors Knowledge Aid for Sierra Leone, a small project in West Africa.

CEC is thus essentially both a British *and* a Commonwealth organisation: a British organisation with a Commonwealth remit. Much of its strength and influence lies in its Westminster base, which it has retained ever since it was founded by British parliamentarians—prominent among them George Thomson, Malcolm MacPherson and Richard Hornby—in the immediate aftermath of the 1959 Commonwealth Education Conference in Oxford. The Council has serving MPs from the three main parties in the House of Commons as Parliamentary Chairpersons, and has Patrons in the House of Lords: they and other parliamentary colleagues regularly interrogate ministers in Parliament about British policy on the development of education in the Commonwealth and from time to time they lead CEC delegations to call on ministers. Many of the Council's meetings are held in the Palace of Westminster.

The Council's advocacy with the UK Government has been addressed mainly to the education and international development departments, and also to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Council has regularly made representations to British ministers on the eve of the CCEMs through both written submissions and delegations to the minister leading the UK team to the Conferences. In recent years the ministerial head of the British delegation has reported back to a public meeting convened by the Council. Over CEC's history, subjects that have particularly engaged its concern in relation to Government policy have been technical and vocational education and training and the provision of practical training and experience to Commonwealth students in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s; and in the 1980s and 1990s the UK's policy on fees for Commonwealth students in Britain.⁷ There has also been an ongoing concern regarding support for university development, particularly in Commonwealth Africa, and education about the Commonwealth.

CEC's most recent campaign, in 2008, was directed against the decision by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to end its funding of Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships for eight more developed Commonwealth countries.⁸ CEC has always commended the United Kingdom's generous contribution to the CSFP, which is directed mainly through the Department for International Development (DFID) to developing countries; but the Council regards exchanges between countries at all levels of development as important and so has valued the comprehensive nature of CSFP and the provision of Commonwealth Scholarships from the United Kingdom to Australia, Canada, Singapore, etc. as well as very poor countries. It thus distances itself from the UK Government's tendency to regard organisations such as the Commonwealth (and UNESCO) as aid agencies rather than as organisations for mutual co-operation. Consequently, the FCO decision was seen as impairing the integral nature of the Commonwealth and as posing the threat that as more countries graduate from aid-worthy status in future they might lose their Commonwealth Scholarship eligibility.

CEC's response to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's announcement was a well-orchestrated multi-pronged campaign consisting of:

- A spate of parliamentary questions in the House of Commons and House of Lords.
- An Early Day Motion in the House of Commons signed by nearly 70 MPs.
- A major public meeting in Central London.
- A letter to *The Times* signed by 60 distinguished Commonwealth citizens, including former Heads of State and Heads of Government.
- An online Downing Street Petition signed by almost 2,000 opponents of the Government's decision.

Government was clearly taken aback by the volume of criticism and although the Foreign Office itself would not relent, the Department of Innovation Universities and Skills together with British universities contributed a modest tranche of funds to keep Commonwealth Scholarships from the United Kingdom open to the countries affected for a further period of years.

CEC has used its base as an avowedly British-based organisation to perform an active role in support of Commonwealth institutions and programmes. Throughout its 50-year history the Council has been close to the pulse of Commonwealth educational co-operation, and has had close links with the education staff at the Commonwealth Secretariat in Marlborough House as well as with other Commonwealth organisations. These were consolidated when in the mid-1980s one of its active Executive Committee members, Peter Williams, became Director of Education at the Secretariat for what was to be a 10-year period from 1984 to 1994.

In recent years the Council has campaigned particularly actively for the maintenance of a strong education presence in the Commonwealth Secretariat, and for support of other key elements in Commonwealth education infrastructure, such as the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan and the Commonwealth of Learning. It has taken a particular interest in: the access of Commonwealth students to tertiary education programmes in other Commonwealth countries and monitoring of Commonwealth student mobility; education about the

Commonwealth; broadening Commonwealth agencies' focus on the two MDGs to include other levels and types of education, stressing the holistic nature of education systems; and arguing for the establishment of a ministerial monitoring and support group for the Secretariat's education team.

It is a curious fact that this very body that has been most active in carrying the flag for Commonwealth educational co-operation should have its membership concentrated in only one Commonwealth country, the United Kingdom. Only a handful of CEC members reside outside the United Kingdom. Nearly all its members are British, among them some from Commonwealth diasporas in Britain. Unlike some of its sister organisations in the Commonwealth Consortium for Education—such as ACLALS (Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies), CASTME, CCEAM and the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS)—the Council does not have branches or chapters in other Commonwealth countries, nor does it have counterpart bodies elsewhere. CEC's position is that it would welcome the creation of sister organisations across the Commonwealth, but there has always been doubt whether sufficiently large clusters of enthusiasts could be assembled in other Commonwealth capitals. The advantages and focuses of interest in London are immense: the Commonwealth Secretariat and Foundation are based there; many Commonwealth CSOs, including the ACU, have their headquarters in London; and virtually every Commonwealth country has diplomatic representation.

The Commonwealth dimension of the Council's work has always been at the forefront of its activity. It has offered a platform in London for education ministers and others from Commonwealth countries to address informed audiences about their countries' development and on two occasions in recent years it has organised major residential conferences in the United Kingdom to welcome back South Africa and Nigeria to the Commonwealth and to discuss their needs for educational assistance from Commonwealth partners. It has prepared published reports and studies on different dimensions of educational development, most recently for the Commonwealth Secretariat on the sustainability of universal primary education in Africa (Bown, 2009), and has campaigned for closer attention to be paid to the support of African universities. It was the CEC that took the initiative in Spring 2009 to convene with the University of Oxford and the Commonwealth Secretariat a major conference in Oxford to mark 50 years of Commonwealth educational co-operation, to weigh the past record and to look ahead to future possibilities.

The CEC was also the moving spirit behind the establishment of the Commonwealth Consortium for Education, linking the different civil society partners in the education sector and helping them to articulate their common interests and concerns. Since the Consortium was founded eight years ago, CEC has provided its Secretary.

It may be a matter of surprise that an institution with a miniscule budget and membership of limited size, and with no paid staff or permanent office over most of its history, should have been able to survive and flourish, to exercise influence in its field of interest and to command the respect of its many partners. How has this come about?

Clearly the Council for Education in the Commonwealth is a very British institution in character and the product of a particular culture—one that has a special place for voluntary organisations and for small influential alliances of

informed people, using their special expertise and contacts to promote public-interest causes. Within that context an examination of CEC's experience would suggest that such success as it has achieved may be attributable to the following factors in particular:

- An ethos of service in pursuit of what the Council perceives to be the public good has informed all CEC's work. This has probably been a key factor in enabling CEC to recruit members and retain their loyalty. Members of its Governing Board (formerly Executive Committee) and committees serve entirely voluntarily, without remuneration.
- The close links with Parliament and political processes have constituted a particular source of strength, contributing to the Council's effectiveness. CEC has always combined analysis with action, and its access to decision-makers has been crucial. The parliamentary link also invests the Council with a certain glamour and prestige, which no doubt enables it to attract membership and support more easily.
- The individuals who have provided the Council with its leadership have been a key factor. The Council has been able to attract and maintain the interest and engagement of some talented individuals and it has been CEC's great good fortune that many of them have sustained their contribution over a long period.⁹ The continuity of parliamentarians and officers dedicated to its cause has helped to ensure that the Council has retained an institutional memory when so many other organisations have been losing theirs through excessive turnover of officers or staff.
- Strong connections with other institutions, both British and pan-Commonwealth, and the construction of alliances in pursuit of its aims have always informed its work. In the United Kingdom CEC has worked closely not only with Parliament but also with the British Council, the universities, and teachers' unions, especially the National Union of Teachers. It has also forged a wide range of partnerships with other bodies in the United Kingdom with mandates for supporting Commonwealth co-operation. The Commonwealth High Commissions have been close allies.
- Location in London, where so much parallel activity on behalf of education in the Commonwealth is centred has facilitated pursuit of the Council's mission.
- The Council has avoided being on anybody's payroll, giving it freedom to pursue its own independent courses of action. It has sought and received grants from foundations and others for particular activities, and has undertaken a limited amount of contract work; but it has been ineligible for Commonwealth Foundation core grants and—unlike many of its UK peers engaging in advocacy work—it has never received funding from the UK department responsible for international assistance. The downside to this is the cost in resources possibly forgone and a constant concern with the state of the Council's finances.

All this does not alter the fact that CEC remains a relatively fragile organisation highly dependent on the spirit of service of its committee members. Now that advocacy work has become a career in many voluntary organisations, it has become progressively more difficult to recruit other than retired people to run a body that

depends on voluntary service. Today's world is very different from that of the early decades of CEC's existence when public institutions would often allow their younger staff members to devote part of their paid time to working with and through CEC for what they saw as a public-service cause. The upshot is that it is now much more difficult than previously to correct the age imbalance in an organisation such as CEC: a besetting problem for all the Commonwealth's voluntary associations.

Conclusions

In this paper it has been argued that although personal and institutional linkages are at the heart of Commonwealth relationships, Commonwealth institutions and governments have paid insufficient attention to supporting and using the civil society networks that are one of the association's most important assets. Many of the most active ones focus on areas of human development, a field that is unfortunately accorded relatively low priority in official Commonwealth agendas.

Commonwealth leaders and the association's central intergovernmental institutions do give increased verbal recognition to civil society's role and have developed mechanisms for consultation that allow civil society voices to be heard in Commonwealth councils. This chimes with the commitment to core values of democracy and respect for diversity and for the increasingly plural nature of contemporary societies; but the Commonwealth would do well recognise the diversity of civil society in general and to make sure that as far as possible those with whom it interacts are more fully representative of the range of interests and perspectives that civil society includes.

Within Commonwealth civil society there is a narrower group of institutions and associations that is committed to sustaining and advancing co-operation on a Commonwealth basis. Many of the civil society voices heard in Commonwealth consultations are, however, uninformed about the Commonwealth's potential and fail to identify points for specific collaborative action using Commonwealth programmes and institutions. Some want to influence Commonwealth governments without being particularly committed to promoting Commonwealth collective endeavour.

More could be done to nurture the civil society constituency of voluntary associations committed to strengthening Commonwealth interchange and Commonwealth values. This is not just because civil society networks represent the essence of the Commonwealth relationship, but also because these bodies can play a major supportive role as champions and critics: a key role in any healthily functioning democracy.

The role and record of one Commonwealth association, the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, has been examined. Its unusual dual mandate of encouraging British participation in Commonwealth education exchanges and at the same time championing the cause at pan-Commonwealth level has been explained. Any admiration of CEC's record in the first of these roles needs to be tempered with realistic recognition that for all the Council's efforts to influence the British Government, the United Kingdom's stance on Commonwealth education co-operation, at least in its multilateral forms, is largely one of indifference. This is illustrated by the appallingly—one might even say insultingly—low level of British ministerial representation at conferences of Commonwealth education ministers. The

UK delegation has not been led by a Secretary of State since 1980, at the height of the full-cost fees crisis. At the recent 50th anniversary conference in Kuala Lumpur, the minister heading the delegation was not able to stretch his attendance—undertaken at great personal effort and commitment on his own part—beyond one day.

From a pan-Commonwealth perspective the Council, and the Commonwealth Consortium for Education to which it belongs, have played the roles of champion and critical friend for the Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations, working closely with their professional staff in education, and have regularly submitted views to Ministers' Conferences and Heads of Government Meetings. This is a vital role because the Commonwealth has no open Parliament or parliamentary committees and many decisions on budgets and programme priorities are taken behind closed doors. The mechanisms of accountability work very imperfectly in such a situation, and professional staff in Commonwealth agencies sometimes feel bereft of external interest and support.

Indeed, it has fallen to bodies such as the Commonwealth Consortium for Education and the Council for Education in the Commonwealth to fill gaps where the IGOs have lacked capacity or imagination. The Consortium has taken up the task of charting and making visible the different dimensions of Commonwealth education co-operation through its regularly updated briefing materials¹⁰ and its *Commonwealth Education Directory*. The CEC prepared the historical record of the first 40 years of Commonwealth educational co-operation (Bown, 2003) and took the initiative in ensuring that the 50th anniversary was appropriately marked in Oxford in 2009.

Finding ways to enlist the capacity of Commonwealth associations is not of course the only mechanism available to the Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations wanting to mobilise support for their work. The Consortium and CEC have proposed that small groups of ministers should convene at intervals between the triennial CCEMs to give support and advice on the implementation of ministerial decisions and to monitor progress. This would create a group of highly placed men and women with a shared sense of obligation to their peers to ensure that effective action was taking place. Education ministers appeared to accept the proposal in Cape Town, but this was one of many ideas they failed to carry forward at 17 CCEM in Kuala Lumpur.

The Consortium and CEC have also urged the Secretariat to make more use of commissions and specialist groups of distinguished professionals drawn on a representative basis from around the Commonwealth to give independent advice and generate new approaches to dealing with challenging issues. There is no shortage of educational co-operation issues for them to consider. Might it not be timely to establish one such group to examine the potential for constructive partnership between the Commonwealth of states and the Commonwealth of peoples?

Notes

1. See Sir Shridath's contribution to this issue, being his latest use of the 'language, law and learning' sequence that has also appeared in some of his earlier writings and speeches.
2. The positioning of the paragraphs about education, gender, health and youth in successive CHOGM communiqués confirms their relatively lowly place among the priority concerns of Heads of Government and the Secretariat.

3. In 2008/09 the UK Government spent £18.2m on the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, £16m from the Department for International Development and £2.2 from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The UK commitment to the principal Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations for the same year was about £16m (Commonwealth Secretariat £4.4m, Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation £8.5m, Commonwealth Foundation £0.9m, Commonwealth of Learning £1.1m).
4. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh is a community development bank specialising in microcredit, making small loans to the poor without requiring conventional collateral. It was established in 1976 by Muhammad Yunus. The majority of its more than seven million borrowers (2007 figure) are women. BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) was founded in 1972 by Fazle Hasan Abed and focuses on poverty alleviation, working mainly in the areas of women's empowerment, education, health and support for income-generation activities in rural Bangladesh.
5. <http://www.thecommonwealthconversation.org/>
6. Report by the Commonwealth High-level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government for their Meeting at Coolom, Australia, in March 2002.
7. The Council with UKCOSA: the Council for International Education prepared a major report on Commonwealth student mobility in 2000, *Student Mobility on the Map* (London: CEC and UKCOSA), and has continued to produce update studies for the past 15 years, following the Commonwealth Secretariat's apparent withdrawal of its once active interest in the subject.
8. Announced to the House of Commons by Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary David Miliband on 13 March 2008.
9. On the parliamentary side people such as George Thomson, Tim Boswell, Simon Hughes, Gladwyn Jebb (as Lord Gladwyn), Frank Judd and Joan Vickers have given extended periods of committed service. Many Members of Parliament served for shorter periods before having to resign on being appointed to ministerial posts. Among Council officers Felicity Bolton, Martin Kenyon, Helen Pickthorn, Maureen Stack and Peter Williams all served over a considerable time-span. For most of its existence the Council has had just four long-serving Secretaries, Maurice Newrick, Dave Daniel, Trevor Bottomley and Kees Maxey, and has been fortunate in the quality of its seven Executive Chairs to date, namely Roy Manley, Jack Thornton, Sir Roy Marshall, Geoffrey Sims, Anastasios Christodoulou, Mark Robinson and Valerie Davey.
10. These first appeared in 2003 and the series was extended to 12 briefing notes in 2006. In 2009 for 17CCEM they were updated and extended further and collated in book form as *Working Together in Education: A Commonwealth Update*, edited by Peter Williams (London: Commonwealth Consortium for Education).

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