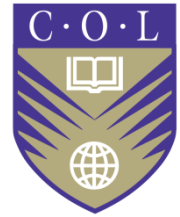


Education and the Future of the Commonwealth



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Summary: FIFTH ANNUAL LECTURE OF THE COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH By The Rt Hon Donald C McKinnon, Secretary General of the Commonwealth 18 January 2001. (courtesy of the Commonwealth Secretariat)

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Let me first thank the CEC for the kind invitation to deliver this year's lecture. It is quite opportune that I should be talking to you on this subject, so soon after the highly successful Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (14CCEM) in Halifax, Canada.

I would, however, like to point out that for the first time in over forty years of Commonwealth education co-operation, ministers reached agreement in Halifax on a major statement that builds on the unique experiences and strengths of the Commonwealth to set out a clear framework for future cooperation in education and human development. This would hopefully enable our societies to meet current and future challenges in a rapidly changing world where education is of paramount importance. That document, entitled Education for our Common Future is also known as The Halifax Statement on Education in the Commonwealth. I strongly recommend it to you as an important guide to understanding what the Commonwealth seeks to achieve in the field of education, and why education itself is so important to the future of the Commonwealth.

Turning to the business at hand, I propose to cover three main points in this lecture. First I shall briefly highlight the dangers of complacency about the future of the Commonwealth. We need to be aware that nothing can be taken for granted in today's world, regardless of pedigree or potential. Second, I shall try to sketch out a personal vision for the future of the Commonwealth. This is perhaps foolhardy of me, given the exponential rate and unpredictable nature of change in today's world. Finally, I shall explore the role of education as a key to the future of the Commonwealth.

The Dangers of Complacency

We are constantly reminded that we live in an era where branding is everything. Recently in the UK, long-standing and well-known brand names have disappeared from the market. We have also seen many international brands, slogans and logos changed to new and trendier ones to help keep enterprises alive and enable them secure a niche in the future. This sometimes produces mixed results, as with strange

paintings on the tailfins of airplanes, or strange words and slogans that replace simple functional names we were quite happy with. One of my favourites is the bold new slogan "Come Alive with Pepsi!" I understand this reads in Chinese as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead!"

Humour aside, this trend in re-branding does make us wonder whether the Commonwealth, as a brand, is in need of a makeover. Is there a threat that it might suffer serious or even terminal decline in the changing market place of international cooperation? Where does 'The Commonwealth' stand in relation to the myriad regional and international organisations that countries subscribe to as they seek to cooperate in order to advance their national interests? Is there a risk of complacency? Will 'The Commonwealth' as a brand be overtaken by changing realities and new priorities to which it cannot adapt? These are not idle questions. It is in the interest of lobbying groups like the CEC to take these questions seriously.

We must not assume that things will continue in the same way as in the past. It is not simply a matter of whether we can persuade Governments to provide the right level of support for the Commonwealth. There is a lot more at stake when we talk about the future of the Commonwealth; unless we come to grips with these realities, there is the danger of being led into atrophy, inertia and decay through complacency.

Maria Montessori, the Italian educator and founder of the Montessori schools cautions us against complacency, saying:

If education is always to be conceived along the same antiquated lines of a mere transmission of knowledge, there is little to be hoped from it . . . For what is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual's total development lags behind?

We are aware that in the face of global changes, priorities and allegiances do not remain stagnant for our member countries. The fact that the Commonwealth continues to exist in the face of such changes is testimony to its resilience, but it is not always clear what this means. It is not simply a matter of hanging on to the ideals of a past era and stubbornly refusing to contemplate a fading future. Is the Commonwealth merely beating a strategic retreat into areas of concern that are still safe havens, but far removed from new priorities? Does it keep out of the danger zones? These are not comfortable questions and they probably sound even more disturbing coming from me! However, we must press on.

What is the relevance and importance of the Commonwealth to member countries and their populations? In fact, what is it about the Commonwealth that is common to all countries, given that they all see it through a different lens? Will there be any serious (not to say passionate) debate about the Commonwealth in the forthcoming UK elections? Did Commonwealth issues feature in other recent elections?

Should we also assume that other member countries place a much higher premium on their regional bodies such as SADC in Southern Africa, ASEAN in Asia, CARICOM in the Caribbean, ECOWAS in West Africa, etc; than in the Commonwealth? Is there a dynamic process of engagement, or are we used when required by our membership, then put back on the shelf?

We may not be too pleased with the answers to such questions, but we must seek to answer them nonetheless. They represent the current reality within which the Commonwealth brand must define itself and compete. Of course we even have competition for the brand name, with the Commonwealth of

Australia, the Bahamas, the Commonwealth of Virginia, of Massachusetts, the Commonwealth of Independent States, etc. In the face of these realities we need to undertake a sober assessment of our Commonwealth and its future if we are to convince others that there is such a future, and if we ourselves are to be properly prepared to shape and safeguard that future. Despite all of this, let me assure you that I would not wish to change our brand name any more than would Coke or McDonalds. I believe it has immense value. In fact, if you believe that changing your name will make a difference, take a look at those that have - if you can still recognise them.

Visions of a Future Commonwealth

One of the prime challenges of the 21st century will be to implement the standards of democracy, human rights and education for all - to complete the unfinished business of the 20th century.

Fred van Leeuwen, Secretary-General, Education International

In sketching out a vision for the future, I do not intend to pre-empt the work of the High Level Review Group (HLRG) set up under the chairmanship of President Mbeki of South Africa. Neither am I revealing any secrets from that group's work. I merely wish to share some of my own personal thoughts and ideas in order to stimulate debate amongst members of the CEC and their guests. I am in total accord with soon-to-be-former US President Bill Clinton's statement that: "the 21st century must be the century of education and the century of the teacher."

It is probably a truism that the Commonwealth has survived over the years because it has adapted to the changing realities of the times. Many of you must have made this argument in the past with some conviction. However, the Commonwealth has also often been identified with the past and therefore doubt has been cast on its relevance and viability for the future. This is a paradox that we must come to grips with if we are to safeguard the future of the Commonwealth.

The first point I wish to emphasise as regards a vision for the future is that the Commonwealth has no future without the younger generation of its member countries. As Diogenes said, "The foundation of every state is the education of its youth". If the Commonwealth exists only in the world of the older generation that witnessed the sunset of an empire and the emergence of a Commonwealth, then it will die with that generation.

It follows from this that one of the most important principles for the future of the Commonwealth is that of regeneration. The Commonwealth must be able to regenerate itself in the imagination and priorities of succeeding generations. It must inspire and touch the lives of the young of today in order to be relevant and meaningful to their governments and their countries in the future.

My second contention is that the Commonwealth does not have a sustainable future without the involvement of the grass roots population - NGOs, educational institutions, professional associations, etc - of its member countries. Our work is multiplied and disseminated by these countless Commonwealth organisations and associations which work in harmony with our aims and objectives on the ground in all our countries.

Many other international organisations have asked us how we developed such effective networks; they do not really believe me when I say that these relationships have evolved over time and represent one of our most valuable assets. This is one of the unique and inexplicable qualities of the Commonwealth that has allowed us to remain effective and relevant.

The third important point is that whilst Commonwealth work has implications for the well being of the general population, there is a distinctive lack of popular awareness of what the Commonwealth means and what it does. Professional associations, community groups and ordinary people must also be encouraged to act as our public relations activists. It is equally important for us to ensure that the hundreds of groups whose names contain 'Commonwealth' are made to understand why they carry that brand name, and the role they have to play in marketing the Commonwealth.

This is the essential message in Derek Ingram's 1997 Review of the Information Programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat. We do have to put more effort into telling people what we do. And we absolutely need the support of member governments and partners like the CEC to help us spread the message.

In these days of opinion polls and sound bites, the Commonwealth needs to be part of the popular vocabulary, to pass the test of relevance and priority. We need to put much more emphasis on taking the Commonwealth to the people, even if we continue to work mainly in the service of governments.

To date, it is fair to say that interest in - and concern about - the Commonwealth has largely been restricted to the 'initiated'. These are the lucky ones who have derived benefits in the past and therefore appreciate the Commonwealth. Even in these cases, there are problems. For instance, it is not clear that Commonwealth Scholars are always aware of the relevance of their scholarship, other than in strictly monetary terms.

The fourth point is that the Commonwealth will have a sustainable future only to the extent that it can genuinely bridge the various divides between its member countries. This is not just about economics or technology or trade, even though these are priority areas for many countries. It is first and foremost about engagement with each other on the democratic basis of mutual respect, equal rights and comparable privileges. In a world of power blocs, trade barriers, military alliances and border restrictions that deepen the divisions between developed and developing nations, the Commonwealth should continue to uniquely link rich and poor, large and small countries through democratic engagement and active involvement at all levels.

This is what the Harare Declaration is about. It is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the Commonwealth is an organisation within which small states know that they matter and have a high priority accorded to their interests. It is also an organisation in which member governments know they will be taken to task if they breach the principles and practice of democratic good governance. It is an organisation that countries continue to belong to on a voluntary basis, with clear expectations of their rights and privileges within what is more a family of nations than an economic, political or military alliance. In a sense, therefore, the Commonwealth has a trust to keep, and if this trust is betrayed, the organisation will not survive.

The spirit of the Commonwealth and the trust it has to keep is illustrated at its best through certain events and phenomena. Last week, I returned from a highly successful meeting in Barbados, where the Commonwealth helped to resolve differences between small states and the OECD over so-called harmful tax practices.

Since I took up office, the Commonwealth has been involved in helping to tackle situations where democracy and good governance have come under threat, such as in Fiji and Pakistan, with problems also in the Solomon Islands, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone. These examples show the value of the Commonwealth in some key areas of concern. It is in the addressing of these areas that the survival and relevance of the Commonwealth in the long term can be influenced.

The fifth point about a vision for the future is that the Commonwealth does not have a future without constructive partnership and alliances with other agencies and organisations. The main implication of this is that we need to be clear about what the Commonwealth has to offer that can be attractive to these other agencies and bring synergy to the partnership. It is in this regard that we must constantly tease out and highlight the key qualities that define our comparative advantage and relative strengths in various spheres of operation, especially as these factors are not always static. What I am talking about here is the role of the Commonwealth as an influential force for good in the modern world.

I believe I have done enough gazing into the crystal ball, although King Solomon aptly remarked that, "Where there is no vision, the people perish". Whilst I have raised some profound challenges and difficult questions, I do hope that I have also shown that the Commonwealth has a future that can be of benefit not only to its members but also to the wider world community. The main challenge of course is how to translate this type of vision into concrete reality. This is where I believe that education can be a critical factor in building and safeguarding the future of the Commonwealth.

I am not an education specialist. It might therefore appear presumptuous of me to try to dissect the notion of education to an audience of education experts. From a layman's point of view however, it seems to me that there are at least three senses in which we can talk of education as a key to the future of the Commonwealth. First, there is education about the Commonwealth; then there is education of the Commonwealth; and finally there is education for the Commonwealth. Let me try and unpack these, while also making some practical suggestions about what our various agencies and organisations can do to translate vision into reality as regards the future of the Commonwealth.

As I said earlier, there is an urgent need to take the Commonwealth to the general public in member countries, particularly the younger generation and the grass roots population. This is what I mean by education about the Commonwealth. It has to do with keeping the brand name visible and familiar to the constituency we seek to serve. We can achieve this through various means, ranging from formal programmes to annual rituals that invoke the brand name in connection with popular activities.

In this country, the Commonwealth Institute has embarked on a bold initiative to promote teaching about the Commonwealth in schools. This is an example of a formal approach to keeping the brand name alive. There are very few initiatives of this type in other member countries, but efforts are being made to promote this in line with the recommendations of education ministers at their 13th conference in Botswana in 1997. With the technologies at our disposal these days, it should not be a problem to collect

information and prepare resource materials for teaching schoolchildren about member countries and the Commonwealth as a whole.

Let's look at our web site and other Internet resources like the excellent site managed by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to ensure that all countries can access such resource materials. Our own Information and Public Affairs Division (IPAD) obviously has a lead role to play in this area, but it also calls for a high degree of collaborative effort on the part of Commonwealth related bodies, such as COL, CEC and others.

It is critical that such efforts do not run afoul of the political correctness test. If countries are to be persuaded to embrace teaching about the Commonwealth in schools, then all countries should be appropriately represented, through approved images, in the resource materials. We should not deal in titillating cultural curios or patronising accounts of different customs and practices.

Staying with schools and young people generally, the celebration of Commonwealth Day represents a less formal and more ritualistic aspect of pushing the brand name. At the moment, the marking of the day carries much of the old Empire Day flavour about it, and it is probably recognised here more enthusiastically than in most other Commonwealth countries. The challenge therefore is to ensure all member countries, perhaps through their leaders, do in some way acknowledge Commonwealth Day. In this way, more people throughout the Commonwealth would know more about each other, the importance of Commonwealth membership and the linkages which permeate the Commonwealth family.

Turning to less formal options, there is a lot to be said for the various annual competitions and prizes in the fields of literature, journalism, sport, and the arts generally. The flagship of course is the Commonwealth Games. I do not think that we take full advantage of the increasing popularity of sports in general to improve our brand visibility.

How about competitions for youth teams in football and cricket, which are currently the two of the most popular sports in member countries? This is the type of initiative that could generate enthusiasm about the Commonwealth brand and get young people to ask questions about it. I know there are resource implications, but most member countries do have national bodies dealing with youth development in football and cricket. This can be an initial avenue for planning Commonwealth Youth Championships in these sports.

It is clear that education about the Commonwealth is more to do with form rather than substance, but this is vital for the brand. We all need to give greater attention to this area. It is not only about courting the media. It is more importantly about getting it to be part of the popular vocabulary in member countries, so that the media cannot afford to ignore or trivialise our brand name.

As regards education of the Commonwealth, we sometimes need to be reminded that our modern education systems have their origins in some form of British (whether English, Scottish or otherwise) education pattern. This provides a strong foundation for collaboration, and it also means that we share certain objectives and goals in education. This has been greatly reinforced by the Halifax Statement on Education in the Commonwealth, which I commended to you earlier.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that one of the legacies the Commonwealth could build for itself is in helping member countries to succeed with education for all their citizens. The reason is quite simple.

As Education Ministers expressed in their Halifax Statement:

Education empowers the poor, safeguards the vulnerable, promotes economic growth and social justice, promotes the values of democracy, human rights, citizenship, good governance, tolerance and pluralism and provides moral and spiritual guidance.

There is much that we can all do to increase the profile of the Commonwealth brand as a major contributor to education in member countries. The whole business of student mobility continues to be a vital avenue in this regard, and I know this is close to the heart of the CEC. As I mentioned in my speech at Halifax, how different the modern Commonwealth would have been if leaders like Nehru, Nkrumah and Manley had not gone to school abroad! We must continue to lobby for support to schemes such as the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), which enable student mobility.

My own view is that more also needs to be done to get a larger number of countries to offer awards, rather than simply to receive them. Of course, this needs to be guided by the principle of countries giving according to their means and receiving according to their needs. I must add here my personal belief that the very best and most sustainable, reusable and life-changing thing we can give our children is education.

It is gratifying to note that proposals are now being discussed, particularly within the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and our own Education Department, to transform the CSFP in line with changing priorities and requirements of a modern Commonwealth. In the past, it has been a prestigious scheme through which individuals and countries have benefited greatly. There is still a strong case for some awards to continue along these lines. However, we must now seek to ensure that within the means available, a revised CSFP can be used to help a greater number of beneficiaries through part awards and other 'less prestigious' assistance.

A revised CSFP should also be more focussed on the critical problems facing member countries, and not just on excellence for its own sake, ignoring the relevance of the field of study. Supplementary schemes such as the Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC) also provide a less expensive, more flexible means of exchange in the field of education.

We are already doing a lot of important work in terms of policy advice and training workshops in such key areas as teacher development, management of institutions, non-formal education, science education, etc. The Halifax Statement has given us a new and exciting framework within which to continue and intensify Commonwealth cooperation in education. What we need to ensure also, is that the Commonwealth brand is enhanced by these activities. There are a number of opportunities that emerge from the Action Plan of the Halifax Statement.

These include:

- A Commonwealth scheme for making educational resource materials (print, electronic, on-line, etc) widely available, and at low cost to member countries;
- A Commonwealth 'Kite-mark' initiative, to guarantee quality and promote portability of a wide range of qualifications from various universities and examination bodies;

- A Commonwealth IT initiative to bridge the digital divide through education, especially distance education, targeting the rural areas and marginalised groups. I am hopeful that we can attract substantial resources from the private sector for such an initiative; and
- A regular pattern of Commonwealth Education training programmes, conducted on a regional basis and engaging the best Commonwealth expertise to deliver the most relevant training for educators, and making full use of the many excellent resource materials which we have developed over the years.

The Education Department at the Secretariat is already working on some of the strategies and implementation plans related to these and other areas of action outlined in the Halifax Statement. I would invite the CEC and all other relevant Commonwealth bodies dealing with education to join in these efforts and make a strong contribution to the successful outcomes we all anticipate.

I must say a word on education for the Commonwealth. If you are well read in the history of the Commonwealth, you will realise that much of what I have said about cooperation has existed for a long time. Common examinations, celebrations, standards, etc, were the hallmark of a previous era.

The modern Commonwealth embraces a new outlook and a different pattern of engagement. There is not and should be no sense of dominance and colonial overtures, but rather leadership and unity in diversity. We are a voluntary organisation to which member countries belong because they share certain ideals, values and principles.

These need to be kept alive, reviewed, reinforced and revised as necessary, to keep the essence of the Commonwealth as a brand. To do this, we need to promote what I call education for the Commonwealth. It is the kind of education that puts certain values, ideals and principles at the heart of the educational process.

Our education experts tell me that this is not so much a matter of teaching certain subjects, but more of creating a learning culture that promotes these attributes. The futurist author, Alvin Toffler, warns us clearly that: "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." So, in dealing with democracy, tolerance, human rights, conflict prevention etc, the key issue is to help all member countries make these an integral part of their education system in the way that suits them best.

These should be part of the shared culture that informs curriculum choice in all our member countries. Most of all they should be part of the institutional culture in schools and universities, so that children live and breathe these things as a part of their lives. In this way we can help to strengthen the franchising elements that define the Commonwealth brand.

There is much more that can be said about how to make a reality of the potential role of education in the future of the Commonwealth. However, before returning to my seat, allow me to briefly summarise:

- For the first time in 40 years, Commonwealth education ministers could agree on a major forward-looking statement;
- The Commonwealth is also looking forward and rejuvenating itself. We are not complacent and are responding to change as it occurs;

· We need to actively involve the young and tell more people what we do and run continuous programmes about, of and for the Commonwealth.

The rest I will leave to the educationalists.

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