

## Notes on a new and innovative Commonwealth – with some old problems

The recent meeting of Commonwealth leaders was a well organised, generously funded event to showcase the best that Britain can offer. Held in London for the first time since 1977, it was in reality hosted not so much by the British Government but by the Head of the Commonwealth, HM the Queen. It was also unique in that the three leading personalities were all women, with Prime Minister Theresa May working closely with the Commonwealth's first female Secretary-General, Patricia Scotland.

The arrangements were lavish. The opening at the Palace was held in the ballroom with leaders sitting on gilt chairs in a pink and gold room with magnificent floral arrangements. There were High Commissioners, representatives of Commonwealth organisations and the last group to arrive were the wives of leaders, whose variety of colours and costumes added to the feeling of grandeur which enveloped the setting. The arrival of other speakers at the event -- the Prime Minister of Malta, the Hon Joseph Muscat and Prime Minister May and Secretary General heralded the arrival of the Queen with members of her family. The four formal speeches were punctuated by musical interludes provided by young artists from many Commonwealth countries. The feeling that this was a family affair was overwhelming.

But as leaders gathered to plan a “more joined-up and brighter” future for all our member states, discussing issues such as innovation and cyber-security where the young will benefit almost to the exclusion of the old, a hidden injustice which had been boiling underground, exploded with the force of a volcano blowing its top. The good ship Windrush suddenly sailed back into the limelight as the treatment of old Jamaicans and others especially from Caribbean states, was revealed in all its horrific details. New immigration rules made many stateless. They were all British citizens when they came to the UK in the 1940s and 1950s, but were caught out if they had failed to get British passports at the time when their countries became independent in the 1960s. They lived all over Britain, never travelled, and suddenly found themselves stripped of benefits, jobs, pension and homes because they had no papers to prove that they were legal.

In addition, many older people, who had never returned, began to travel back for funerals and to see relatives. They had passports which did not have the “leave to remain in the UK for an indefinite period” stamp, and so were denied entry back to their homes and families in Britain. This dire situation had existed for a few years, but finally the plight of those who were still in Britain and who were suffering, caught the attention of the media, in particular the Guardian newspaper, which made it into a national issue. I too do not have a British passport, and my “right to remain” is in an old passport, and I am afraid that if I lose it, I could be in a similar situation. As I watch this tragedy unfold, I hope that a decision to waive fees for the new biometric card for this category of people, will be made.

The refusal of the British Prime Minister to meet with Caribbean leaders on the day when the new, inclusive Commonwealth was being launched propelled the issue into an international scandal. It was the day when

people from organisations and businesses from all over the Commonwealth began their meetings. This was the start of three days of events, when members of a wide variety of Commonwealth organisations began their deliberations. It was not a day when any politician should have chosen to give the impression that this was not, after all, a family.

What has been regrettable about this matter is that this was the best attended meeting in years, with 47 out of the 53 member states represented by the Head of Government. There was a reason for this. There had been a personal invitation from the Queen to have the opening ceremony in the splendour of Buckingham Palace and a day at Windsor Castle, much too seductive for anyone to decline. But sadly some countries found themselves in the midst of elections or other distractions, which kept leaders from important countries such as Malaysia away, and forced the early departure of Cyril Ramaphosa, the newly elected President of South Africa.

The agenda was also well prepared, with early announcements of positive action, announced in the days before the meeting began and the drip feed of interesting developments coupled with the plight of the boat people gave much publicity for the event. The opening of the four forums – on Women, Youth, Peoples and Business -- also helped to generate interest in the Commonwealth as nearly 2000 delegates assembled to exchange views on the state of their countries and world affairs.

These meetings helped to set a positive view of the Commonwealth and its work. The standard-bearer for this approach was the Commonwealth Secretary General who, after two years in office, was attending her first CHOGM. At the opening of the People's Forum on Monday March 16, she spoke passionately of a vibrant and forward looking Commonwealth, and the partnerships which were being created to sustain this thrusting initiative.

The key component of this will be the Commonwealth Innovation Hub, a platform “to tap and unleash the innovation wealth of the Commonwealth” and described as a quantum leap in the process to reform and renew the association. This was the beginning of a series of daily announcements, such as extensive collaborations with international, civil society and knowledge partners. It included an agreement to establish a Commonwealth Innovations Fund in partnerships with the Global Innovation Fund, and a social venture fund capitalised by the Governments of Australia, UK and South Africa among others.

At the end of the week, leaders had expressed strong support for the world's multilateral trading system and adopted a six-point connectivity agenda to boost trade and investment links across the Commonwealth. They committed themselves to increasing intra-Commonwealth trade to US\$2 Trillion by 2030, to take action on cyber-security between now and 2020, and agreed on a bold, coordinating push to protect the ocean from the effects of climate change, pollution and overfishing. This Blue Charter will affect one third of the world's coastal waters, helping to sustain livelihoods and ecosystems globally.

Countries lined up in pairs to work together on various aspects of this huge undertaking, which was an impressive example of the strength of cooperation which exists between member states. Much of the guidance on this wide agenda will be provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat and leaders made public their commitment to a stronger Secretariat, including through sustainable funding.

A new and interesting facet of this meeting were the reports of international support and interest in the Commonwealth and its Secretariat. Bill Gates of Microsoft dropped by, and Bloomberg Philanthropies of New York announced it would be working closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat to explore future joint initiatives in support of International Trade, Innovation and Sustainability. There were many other plans being generated in partnerships which the Secretary-General has set as one of her goals to rejuvenate the Secretariat.

But future leaders of the countries represented were not left behind. Every Forum, every leader, every announcement never failed to mention that young people had to be involved in all future activities. They will inherit a world which this meeting will have helped to fashion.

This was an historic meeting because it enabled many people, particularly the British, to see at first hand the special relationship which exists between the Queen and the Commonwealth. She has been assiduous in maintaining her links with member states and their peoples, she has always taken a keen interest in the development of states from the days of early independence to the present day and many leaders have always commented on her keen interest in and knowledge of their countries when they have met her in private audiences. This is her last meeting and it is right that Prince Charles, who will take over some of her duties as Head, has been giving the task of keeping her legacy strong and enduring.

*Patsy Robertson, Chair, Ramphal Institute*

## *The communiqué from a development angle*

The particular concern of the Ramphal Institute for the development of Commonwealth countries – especially the least developed – was followed up in various parts of the leaders' communiqué. At a time of threatened protectionism, especially by the United States, Heads "reaffirmed their commitment to free trade in a transparent, fair and open rules-based multilateral trading system, which takes into account the special requirements of least developed countries and small and vulnerable economies" (para 1).

The far-sighted report of the Ramphal Commission on Migration and Development (2011) was echoed in para 15 where Heads "recognised that safe, regular and responsible migration, with full respect for international human rights obligations, can deliver socio-economic benefits and improve the resilience and inclusive growth of member countries and lead to sustainable development." They welcomed the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and urged Commonwealth governments to be actively involved in the led up to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

They also urged women's economic empowerment, with an increase in the number and success of women-owned businesses, and increased opportunities for women to trade internationally. They were concerned about employment for the growing population of young people. They agreed on the need for a systems approach, including skills building, entrepreneurship, apprenticeships, and the need for better data to target interventions effectively (para 19). They want large scale public and private investments, and better

coordinated strategies from international financial institutions, in sectors that will help young people especially.

They also focused on the vulnerability of some small states, in spite of the impression of wealth they may give, because of external economic shocks and catastrophic climate shocks. This has been a continuing concern for the Ramphal Institute, which has been working on the case for a ring-fenced Small States Fund for the Commonwealth. They called on the international community to support effective debt management and transparency and also commended the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub. They welcomed member states' support for the Malta-based Commonwealth Small States Centre of Excellence and the Commonwealth Small States Trade Financing Facility ( para 23 ).

In a wide-ranging communiqué of 54 paragraphs, complemented by a number of specific initiatives, the Heads did not comment on the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, launched when Arnold Smith was the first Secretary-General, which is now much reduced in size. But of much interest to the Ramphal Institute, because of the direct involvement of Sir Shridath Ramphal, it noted with pleasure that Heads "reiterated their unequivocal support for the maintenance and safeguarding of Guyana's sovereignty and territorial integrity". The UN Secretary-General determined in January that the land controversy between Venezuela and Guyana should be settled at the International Court of Justice, and Sir Shridath is advising the Government of Guyana.

*Richard Bourne, Trustee, Ramphal Institute*