

THE COMMONWEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Priorities from Colombo to Valletta



The Royal Commonwealth Society

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report summarises an event that was organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society on the 24th of March 2014. The discussion took place at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and sought to address a range of human rights priorities for the 53 Commonwealth member states set following the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It also aimed to look ahead to the next summit in Valletta, Malta in 2015.

WITH THANKS TO



The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative is an independent, non-partisan, international non-governmental organisation, mandated to ensure the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth.



The Kaleidoscope Trust is a UK based charity working to uphold the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people internationally. They believe that the rights of all people should be respected equally, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Commonwealth and Human Rights: Priorities from Colombo to Valletta

Panel:

Michael Lake, Director, Royal Commonwealth Society (Chair)

Purna Sen: Deputy Director, International Affairs Institute, LSE

Tim Hancock: Amnesty International

Edwin Sesange: Out and Proud LGBTI Diamond Group Africa

Rajiv Joshi: Acting CEO, The B Team

Introductory Remarks- The Rt Hon Baroness Warsi

Note: Baroness Warsi was unable to give her introduction due to being called away to answer a debate in the House of Lords, but it is printed in full below.

I am delighted to welcome you all to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I am grateful to the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Kaleidoscope Trust, and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative for bringing this event together and for helping to maintain a focus on human rights in the Commonwealth. And I thank each of the panel members for sharing their expertise and their time this evening.

We come together with two shared interests:

The Commonwealth;

And the importance of human rights as a core value which underpin the Commonwealth as an organisation.

And as the Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for Human Rights, it is a cause that I am personally committed to.

Next month we will mark the 65th Anniversary of the London Declaration and the creation of the modern Commonwealth.

The United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka united in 1949 as equal members of the Commonwealth, to co-operate in the pursuit of peace, liberty and progress.

Over time these these fundamental values have been enhanced and strengthened:

Through the Singapore Declaration in 1971: Committing all members to the principles of human dignity and equality;

Through the Harare declaration in 1991: Committing all members to equal rights and opportunities for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief;

And most recently the Commonwealth Charter in 2012 – signed by all members in London. The Charter encompasses the 16 core values and principles of the Commonwealth, including:

- Human Rights;
- Democracy;
- Tolerance, Respect and Understanding;
- Freedom of Expression;
- And equality and respect for all people on any grounds.

We should not underestimate the achievement in agreeing the Commonwealth Charter. It is never easy getting consensus within an international organisation. I should know as Minister with responsibility for the UN. Commonwealth members should be commended for what they have achieved.



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The Commonwealth Charter was signed by all members in 2013

However, perhaps the greater challenge is putting words into action.

So, collectively, the Commonwealth needs to take concrete steps towards implementing the commitments and aspirations all members have agreed.

Some have, perhaps rightly at times, questioned the credibility of the Commonwealth as an international organisation founded on its values – and given that its members are at different stages of implementing the Charter.

I recognise these concerns.

But we also have to be realistic about the extent of the challenges we face and the time it will take to implement and achieve real, sustained and necessary change.

We must remember the Commonwealth is a family of 53 equal members. With equal voices. And although we are united by shared history, shared goals and shared aspirations, like most families, we do not always agree.

But the best way to address an issue is to work together to find a way forward.

This is not always easy, but is always necessary.

Today:

- 35 Commonwealth members still retain the death penalty;
- Over 40 countries still criminalise homosexuality;
- Many Commonwealth citizens continue to face restrictions on their right to express themselves freely;
- And others are unable to practise their chosen religion or belief;

So there is clearly much work to do. But let us also not forget the progress we've made.

At the Heads of Government meeting in Colombo last November, Commonwealth members committed to:

- Peaceful, open dialogue and the free flow of information, through a free and responsible media.
- Recognising that the same rights and responsibilities that people have offline must also be protected online;
- Increasing their efforts in protecting and promoting freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.
- Continue making steps to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage;
- Support conflict-affected states in the fight against sexual violence in armed conflict;

And they recognised that gender equality and empowerment of women are at the core of human development.

And I am very encouraged that the next Commonwealth Law Ministers' meeting in Botswana in May will focus on the 'Rule of Law and Human Rights'. I hope Law Ministers will take this valuable opportunity to have a frank and open discussion on the real need for change within the Commonwealth.

So, the Commonwealth should build on all this progress and look for more opportunities to continue the discussion and help influence attitudes.

And the UK is committed to supporting that work.

To honour the values of the Charter, we will continue to speak out when basic human rights – life, liberty, and personal safety - are violated.

Recent developments - like those we've seen against the LGBTI community in Uganda, Nigeria and India - are particularly worrying. I recently met with Frank Mugeshi from Uganda, who feared for his life. This cannot be right.

And therefore, the UK, with other likeminded states within the Commonwealth, will continue to press member states to recognise that there can be no justification for infringing such fundamental human rights – regardless of gender, sexuality or any other characteristic.

We also continue to call for all states, not just those in the Commonwealth, to stop the use of the death penalty.

“Today 35 Commonwealth members still retain the death penalty, and over 40 countries still criminalise homosexuality.”

And we also continue to work with countries to ensure they guarantee the freedom of religion or belief for all.

And as many of you know, the UK has taken a leading role to end sexual violence in conflict. At the UN General Assembly in 2013, the Foreign Secretary launched a Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, which 141 countries have now signed, including many Commonwealth countries. I very much hope that all Commonwealth countries will endorse it as soon as possible.

I am pleased that the Commonwealth agreed at last year's Heads of Government meeting to support conflict-affected states in preventing sexual violence. Commitments that incorporate the needs of women and children, and that support civil society to better monitor and document crimes of sexual violence in armed conflict.

By signing up to the Declaration, I hope that all Commonwealth members will attend the Global Summit in June that the Foreign Secretary will co-host with the Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Angelina Jolie.

This event will mark a major step forward in tackling impunity for this abhorrent crime, which perpetuates cycles of conflict and poverty, and for which few, if any, culprits are ever prosecuted.

And I'm a firm believer that the Commonwealth is well-placed to make a significant difference to this important issue of international peace and security.

But I'm also a firm believer that human rights should not be seen in isolation. They are central to strong, prosperous societies and to sustained development in the Commonwealth. And the British Government champions that argument.

That is why we launched an action plan last September, to implement the UN Guiding Principles on business and human rights. It sets out Government actions and expectations of British business to behave responsibly in the UK and internationally. And we call on all our international partners, including in the Commonwealth, to put the Guiding Principles into effect, to improve human rights and sustainable business environments the world over. It doesn't just make moral sense. It makes business sense too.

So, I hope I leave you in no doubt about the commitment of the British Government, despite the real challenges, towards promoting human rights across the Commonwealth.

Together with the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and colleagues across Government, we will continue to ensure that respect for human rights is a consistent theme running through Britain's domestic and foreign policies. It is something on which we will not compromise.

Because the aspirations of Commonwealth citizens – shared the world over - for security, stability and a better life can only truly be realised by open and democratic societies founded on values such as respect, tolerance, rule of law, freedom and equality.



Michael Lake - Director, Royal Commonwealth Society

Thank you for joining us here today in this wonderful setting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to discuss the topic of 'human rights in the Commonwealth'. I would like to thank the FCO for their wonderful hospitality, as well as our partners on this event, the Kaleidoscope Trust and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative.

We have a room today full of people from diverse areas of society; be it academia, the diplomatic world, civil society or business. Since its foundation in 1868, The Royal Commonwealth Society has always brought people together from different backgrounds to build dialogue around important issues. In the 100 years that we existed before the Commonwealth Secretariat was founded, the RCS was the main venue for Commonwealth countries and citizens to discuss their shared values and aspirations. Today, the society is still advocating for the values, and indeed the value, of the Commonwealth.

The Charter that all 53 Commonwealth nations signed in 2013 codified for the first time the values that the association upholds, stating the need for the Commonwealth to act as 'a compelling force for good'. One of the key Commonwealth values is that of human rights, and the Charter affirms that universal human rights form the foundation of a peaceful, just and stable society. It also states a clear opposition to all forms of discrimination, 'whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief or other grounds'.

It has now been a year since the Charter was signed, and four months since the last Heads of Government meeting in Colombo, and there are around 20 months left until the next meeting in Valletta. Has the Charter helped in the promotion of human rights around the Commonwealth in the last year? And what should the human rights priorities be for the Commonwealth between now and Valletta?

To answer these two important questions, we have a fantastic panel from the worlds of business, academia, and civil society.

Tim Hancock is the Director of the Chief Executive's Office at Amnesty International UK, and is responsible for Amnesty UK's human rights programmes, projects and campaigns;

Rajiv Joshi is the CEO of the B-Team (a coalition of business leaders aiming to make business a driving force for social, environmental and economic benefit);

Purna Sen is Deputy Director of the Institute of Public Affairs at the London School of Economics, having previously served as head of Human Rights at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Finally, Edwin Sesange is a prominent Ugandan LGBTI rights activist from Uganda who is now living in the UK as a refugee.

Tim Hancock- Director of CEO's Office, Amnesty International

- There is a general lack of knowledge about what the Commonwealth is, what it stands for and what it does. Over the last 15 years at Amnesty International, the Commonwealth, and what it does for Human Rights, has barely featured on the agenda.
- The decision for our leaders to attend the Commonwealth Heads Of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which according to the UNHCHR is showing signs of heading in an increasingly authoritarian direction and stands accused of contravening international law, gives the impression of indifference to human rights issues. And in fact there is nothing coming from the Commonwealth to suggest that it is a venue for exercising a significant influence over a human rights agenda.
- The Commonwealth has the potential to progress human rights. It is an interesting 'club', and as a network of networks can achieve progress in interesting ways. Whilst more dialogue is better than less, this doesn't make for a human rights agenda, and the Commonwealth has to decide if it wants to take human rights seriously.
- The Commonwealth Charter is a statement from the Commonwealth that human rights do matter. But the words in the Commonwealth Charter do not match actions – the people of the LGBTI community in Uganda can't be rejoicing at the Charter, given recent legislative changes criminalising homosexuality
- Leadership on human rights is also not forthcoming: The Gambia has called time on the Commonwealth, before the Commonwealth called time on its government.

- The Royal Commonwealth Society drew attention to these same 3 countries – Uganda, Sri Lanka and The Gambia – in its ‘Commonwealth Conversation’ report of five years ago, and was told that human rights abuses were the internal affairs of those countries. Furthermore, the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) recommended a Commissioner for Human Rights, but this has again not been put into place. If there is no interest in following up on the findings of the Royal Commonwealth Society and the EPG, perhaps the Commonwealth needs to say that they no longer care about human rights.
- If human rights is on the agenda, then we need a Commonwealth that can assess the human rights of its member states; react to human rights developments (seizing windows of opportunity as well as acting when human rights are contravened); and introduce an independent body to do this, but one that has status within the Commonwealth. This doesn’t exist at present.
- Programmes for progress need to be in place as well. Early and forced marriage definitely merits Commonwealth attention. CHRI identifies freedom of information as a crucial rights area that needs to be addressed, so that, for example, indigenous people are able to know what is being planned by businesses on lands that they have held for centuries.
- The Commonwealth can also support small states with technical assistance and the means by which to play a bigger role on the international stage.
- 2 years ago CHRI pointed to the shrinking space for human rights defenders. This is not just a Commonwealth issue but a global one. The Commonwealth should get to grips with this, breaking down pernicious NGO registration and funding rules.
- Finally, from Amnesty’s perspective, the Commonwealth should put in place the protections that minimise torture – possible through myriad Commonwealth parliamentary and lawyers associations, and through police forces sharing best practice.



The Eminent Persons Group meeting with The Rt Hon. William Hague MP in 2011

Edwin Sesange- Out and Proud LGBTI Diamond Group Africa

- Looking back to the 2011 Perth CHOGM, many positive recommendations and speeches were made. UK PM David Cameron promised to cut aid to countries that don’t respect LGBTI rights, and Commonwealth Secretary General Sharma also made positive statements about LGBTI rights. However, they have not followed these statements with actions.
- In Perth, the Charter was also recommended, and is now in place. Her Majesty The Queen stated that it represented a will to look after those who are vulnerable. LGBTI people are vulnerable in some countries around the Commonwealth, but are not protected.
- Following these various positive steps, last year at Colombo, LGBTI issues weren’t on the agenda even though many approaches were made to leaders to speak out. Sri Lanka criminalises LGBTI rights, and The Gambia had just pulled out because of pressure exerted on it over this issue, so perhaps people did not have the political will to discuss the issue at that time.
- There have been many LGBTI regressions and human rights abuses following the Colombo CHOGM. India has now criminalised homosexuality, followed by Nigeria, and then Uganda signed in a draconian law violating the African Union Charter and its own constitution.
- The Chair of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (Tanzania), when asked about a position on human rights, said that the West should go slow when criticising issues that affect African cultural norms and values. However the Commonwealth should not be worried about upsetting African countries. Homophobia can be traced

to the colonial era, because these laws were introduced by the British government.

- The Secretary-General of the Commonwealth has stated that there is no agreed Commonwealth position on gay rights, even if the Commonwealth Secretariat was uncomfortable with recent developments in Uganda. It is not possible to uphold human rights, without a position on gay rights.
- The fact remains that LGBTI rights abuses continue in the Commonwealth, and so LGBTI rights should be on the agenda at the next CHOGM.

Purna Sen- Deputy Director, International Affairs Institute at the London School of Economics

- There are two stories about the Commonwealth – how it sees itself and how it is seen. These perceptions are diverging, which is a question that should be addressed in Valletta.
- The Commonwealth sees itself as a family. One which is supportive, loyal, a harbinger of harmony and calm, friendly but critical, and peaceful. It also sees itself as doing new work around development and democracy.
- Outside the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth isn't talked about, recognised or respected.
- Those in the world of human rights who do recognise the Commonwealth do not hold it in the highest regard. The Commonwealth claims it is a values-based organisation, but the mechanisms to deliver these values have been contested both within and outside the organisation.
- As Head of the Human Rights Unit at the Commonwealth Secretariat I had 3 staff and a budget of £225,000. The Economic Affairs and Political Affairs departments had 40-50 staff each and a budget of millions. The Human Rights Unit has a 'Head', the Economic Affairs and Public Affairs Units have 'Directors'. The Commonwealth Secretariat is sending a message here about the importance and value of human rights work to the organisation – it's the poor relation. I left the organisation two and a half years ago: my replacement remains a temporary appointment.
- Key Commonwealth issues that are not being addressed include the death penalty – with a disproportionate number of users in the Commonwealth; and the criminalisation of LGBTI rights – which is the case in 43 Commonwealth countries.
- I currently work on LGBTI rights because I was in the Commonwealth, and saw the toxicity with which homosexual people are viewed in the Commonwealth. A dangerous connection is being made between homosexuality and paedophilia. There is little understanding in the Commonwealth Secretariat about these issues, and often sovereignty is used as a reason for inaction, without employing international standards.
- At the last CHOGM, the Commonwealth Secretariat's reputation was sullied by holding its highest meeting in a country facing international opprobrium on its human rights record. Some member states refused to send a representative, including Mauritius, which meant it had to forego its upcoming chairmanship and this is why the upcoming CHOGM will be hosted instead by Malta.
- The challenges that the Commonwealth faces in regaining its reputation on human rights are still there. It has a Charter now, but in the time since it was signed, Uganda and Nigeria have both passed anti-homosexuality legislation, Cameroon's persecution of LGBTI individuals has continued, and India has upheld section 377 of its penal code, which criminalises same sex activity.
- I ask the Commonwealth, what is the value of your values? How will you implement them, and thus make the Charter real? There is currently a mismatch between

“As head of the Human Rights Unit at the Commonwealth Secretariat I had 3 staff and a budget of £225,000”



The 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) was held in Sri Lanka.

words and deeds in the Commonwealth. The Charter states ‘we the people’ but in fact it was written by governments and the Eminent Persons Group, and it falls far short of its potential.

- Human rights isn’t about an instrumentalisation of people for other ends, it’s about the recognition and respect for diversity which the Commonwealth shouts about but isn’t acting strongly enough to enforce and uphold. It’s about respect and tolerance.
- My question is, will those who want tolerance and values win out over those who turn a blind eye on delivering human rights.

Rajiv Joshi- CEO, The B-Team

- I first attended a CHOGM in Malta, as a young activist. As someone who was part of the 50% of those in the Commonwealth under 25, I believed that there was still opportunity and hope and promise in what the Commonwealth could provide in a world of increasing despair and uncertainty. The reality 8 years later is that the world is more uncertain and there is more despair.
 - In 2050, there will be 9.5 billion people in the world, over half of whom will be in the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth represents the majority of the poorest of the poor in the world, and there is thus great opportunity in this grouping of countries working together to solve problems. It would be a great loss if the Commonwealth were to collapse, given what it could provide to the world.
 - The poorest countries in the world are not invited to the table at the G8 or G20, but have a platform in the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth thus needs to reinvent itself in order to represent the poorest effectively.
 - Currently, the Commonwealth sets bold principles and values, but does not stand up for these, and thus opens itself up to questions of validity.
 - Young people today look around and are demoralised by the treatment of their brothers and sisters around the world, which undermines their dignity.
 - But today I would like to speak on economic, social and cultural rights because we live in a world where inequality is rife. A world where the top 300 people have more wealth than the bottom 3 billion, which is sickening.
- “It would be a great loss if the Commonwealth were to collapse, given what it could provide to the world”.***
- We have a poor global record on sustainability, having crossed three of the nine planetary boundaries. If countries can’t find ways to cooperate, hope is lost on this front. At the B Team, we recognise that we can’t wait for the forests to burn and the seas to turn black before governments, civil society organisations and business come together to solve problems. The Commonwealth Business Forum is one of the largest convening of business leaders in the world – bigger than Davos – and should be a platform for cross-sector discussion.
 - We can’t continue in a world where the G20 is left to solve these problems. Other groups of countries need to work together and move faster to achieve change.
 - Business also needs to change. 3000 companies are responsible for 30% of environmental impact in the world –business has a large responsibility for many of the world’s problems, such as factory fires in Bangladesh. Business needs to start being part of the solution. Civil Society Organisations are unable to solve these alone, and governments are unwilling to act. If we could use the collective power of business leaders across the Commonwealth to drive increased social mobility, to pay employees a share of the value they create, to develop business models that actually help to restore the planet, we could achieve significant impact on the well-being and prosperity of individual people.
 - But none of this should come at the cost of fundamental human rights – which are inalienable and indivisible.
 - The Commonwealth needs to ask how it can stay true to its values whilst leading the world in solving some of the most prescient problems for the coming decade.
 - There is hope. 50% of the Commonwealth is under 25 and has the potential to be a source of change, but we need to mobilise coalitions across sectors to solve problems, demonstrate that change is possible, and lead by example.

Discussion topics

LGBTI

- *How can we, in a meaningful way, get LGBTI rights on the next CHOGM agenda?*

ES: The LGBTI community has a strong case to put forward. We have lost many lives through persecution, and we are economically disadvantaged. I am a refugee: I was deported because of my sexuality. The Commonwealth is fearful of discussing LGBTI issues, but what we must remember is that many countries around the Commonwealth inherited anti-gay laws, and now they consider this discrimination to be a cultural value or norm. The Commonwealth should stop worrying about losing membership – LGBTI rights are a big elephant in the room and should as a starting point be discussed – especially by those countries that criminalise it. It's not right not to – we are in the same club, but have different living standards. How many people must die before we start talking about this?

RJ: It's outrageous that this happens across the world. Coalitions should write to governments in different parts of the world to make sure this is added to the agenda.

PS: With 43 countries in the Commonwealth criminalising this, it's not going to get on the agenda. What we need is a space in which rights are discussed, and from that this issue can be brought up. There is an effort now to get a cross-country Commonwealth LGBTI NGO registered with the Commonwealth Foundation. We need recognition for this area of rights as legitimate

Audience comment: The issue of human rights in the Commonwealth is so important. But each country in the Commonwealth is independent, and membership is voluntary. Encouraging human rights violators to reform rather than crucifying governments is a better approach. We need to understand the diversity of the Commonwealth. The way everyone here is seeing the Commonwealth is from a London perspective.

ES: Homophobia arrived in Africa with the British. Generations have been allowed to continue this trend, and now it is considered a cultural norm. Cultural values have grown with the law and with religious extremism.

- *What is the international level of interest in LGBTI rights?*

TH: The UK used to have a homophobic culture. I grew up surrounded by this culture, and as a child reflected it. What changed? I met somebody who was homosexual. And I could only do that because they were able to be openly homosexual. We talk about future generations being drivers of change, but without access to people with different backgrounds, and to information, beliefs and attitudes will not change. The Commonwealth needs to look at human rights defenders as a whole, which includes LGBTI and other groups.

Sri Lanka

- *What was the British Government's response to the Sri Lankan civil war that ended in the genocide of 40,000 Tamils?*

TH: David Cameron went to the CHOGM, and spoke more about the human rights situation in Sri Lanka than I have heard spoken before. The same went for the FCO, and this drew attention to the issues. Cameron made a very public statement that he was going to push for meaningful action at the Human Rights Council, which we will discover at the end of the month.

Commonwealth Structures

- *What sanctions can be brought to bear for human rights abuses?*

PS: Formal sanctions – e.g. suspension – can be levelled for flouting the Commonwealth norms through the military overthrow of democratically elected governments. On other values, sanctions are rare. Persuasion and encouragement towards good behaviours are preferred. Staff in the Commonwealth Secretariat are supposed to respond to requests for assistance, which means that the proactive side is removed from the staff. One way is to use the Universal Periodic



President Yoweri Museveni signed the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act into law in February 2014

Review at the UN-Human Rights Council to intervene and offer advice. It should be noted that sanctions are not favoured by the Secretariat.

- *Given that a new Secretary General will be elected in 2015, what can be done to pull together the human rights and development agendas?*

ES: The Commonwealth needs to look at the economic well-being of its citizens. The Commonwealth needs to reinvent to renew its attraction. Projects with youth should continue and grow.

TH: You can't achieve anything serious on peanuts, so resources need looking at. We need to narrow the gap between words and actions. If words are empty, then either shut up, or do something else.

PS: In the next year and a half, we need to watch and see if the Commonwealth lives up to its potential. The next Secretary-General has to make something of the Commonwealth with whatever they inherit – funding could again be cut given what some big members have said recently. The funding has gone down at the Secretariat, not least of which because people are not content with the work of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth claims its value-add is on values, so if it doesn't deliver on values than one has to ask 'what is the purpose of the Commonwealth?' The Kaleidoscope Trust supports LGBTI activists in countries where it is unsafe to be gay, and our priority is the Commonwealth, because it disproportionately discriminates and legislates against LGBTI individuals.

RJ: Clarity of purpose is critical. In an era that is increasingly interconnected, the Commonwealth can draw legitimacy not just from its governments but from its people. The power to engage people in a dialogue is something which the Commonwealth can take some leadership in. However, participation means nothing without accountability and the Commonwealth needs to recognise this. The Commonwealth has great civil society organisations but in many of its countries these are under threat, and the space for them is being reduced. As a final point, the world would be a worse place if we didn't have a platform where the richest and the poorest countries in the world could meet, and so a lot could be lost without the Commonwealth – and we shouldn't lose sight of that either.

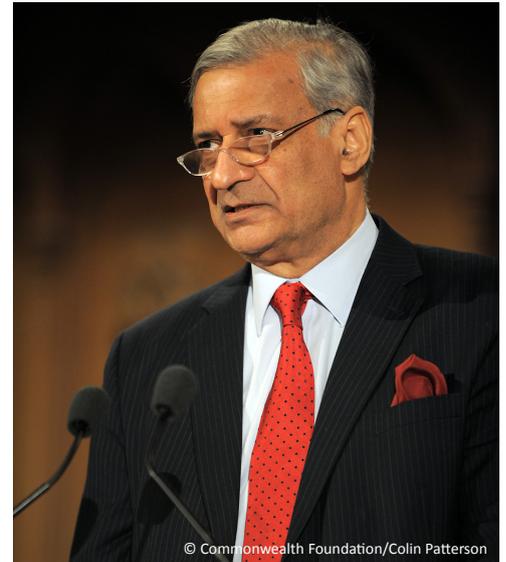
- *How can the Commonwealth better advertise its own value?*

ES: By being more relevant and talking about real issues. They can invest in projects in countries with the most need.

RJ: Value comes in the minds of citizens from seeing action. The Commonwealth needs to demonstrate its ability to act. At the COP 20 in Lima, the Commonwealth countries could set targets that are more ambitious than in the rest of the world. On the Post-2015 agenda, the Commonwealth could try to redistribute wealth in their own countries. Or on youth unemployment, the Commonwealth could support youth entrepreneurship and innovation. On business and human rights, the Commonwealth should adopt the UN Guiding Principles into the Charter, and business leaders could come together and go beyond the guiding principles and actually stand up for human rights.

PS: On cultural resistance to change – cultural defences are chosen and they can be unchosen – you can choose what is right or what is easy. There isn't universal resistance to things that are western – we all speak English, use mobile phones and the internet, drive cars and wear suits – all western things. We choose what we want to take from elsewhere and reject what we don't want to change. In international human rights law – culture is not a defence. In terms of the Commonwealth being ahead of other organisations – many countries in the Commonwealth allow the death penalty, and there is resistance to dealing with this in the Commonwealth because of diversity. However the Francophonie is working towards the elimination of the death penalty. The Commonwealth needs to decide if its values mean something or if they are just rhetoric. I want to see a regular reporting of countries and what they have done for human rights for their citizens. CMAG should have a broader remit, and wider mechanisms for conversations to be held around human rights.

Audience comment: First point - The Commonwealth is far ahead of any other international organisation in its pursuit of human rights in general. Sri Lanka does not doom the Commonwealth – we should be looking ahead to Valletta and asking what will happen there. Second point – the Commonwealth is the international forum in which the NGOs have a more privileged place in setting the agenda. They have closer ties with the official elements of the Commonwealth. The Heads of Government are more accessible in the Commonwealth than in any other organisation. These are valuable



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A new Commonwealth Secretary-General will be elected in 2015, replacing the incumbent HE Kamallesh Sharma

assets, and shouldn't be undervalued. How do we advertise the Commonwealth better? Valletta may be a great opportunity.

Early and forced marriage

- *If a non-member with issues around EFM were to apply to join the Commonwealth (Yemen), in what way can the Commonwealth help with the struggle to end early and forced marriage?*

PS: The country would undergo a human rights assessment, which would flag up issues such as EFM. The Secretariat separates gender and human rights, so EFM is covered by a different, and better resourced, team. Yemen would have to decide whether this is a human rights or a gender issue. The gender team would work with your government on where it can improve its standards and reduce the issue – and change would depend on your government's appetite to take recommendations on board.

ML: The Royal Commonwealth Society works on EFM, and the Commonwealth family has been active on this in recent years. Raising the matter in the context of human rights and the right to education, and also addressing modern day slavery, is making some headway. There is a sense that there can be achievement here.

Closing remarks- Michael Lake

As the most broadly based organisation in the Commonwealth family, the RCS looks for guidance on its priorities from Commonwealth governments, but also from civil society. Today we have seen that those priorities do not necessarily overlap, and in many cases there can be serious disconnects between the two. I would like to see greater leadership from the Commonwealth on issues of human rights, and far more engagement with civil society. The golden era of the Commonwealth was when it took a strong role in addressing the iniquitous situation of apartheid. Currently, the Commonwealth seems to be lacking a sense of purpose, and it is down to civil society to constantly make the case for the Commonwealth doing more, and doing it more effectively.

Although there has been a general sense of frustration and a lot of questions raised about the utility of the Commonwealth on these issues, it is important to remember that it is far more than an intergovernmental institution. The Commonwealth is a network of citizens, and it is through aligning the desires of these 2.2 billion people with the policies of their governments that we can make real progress. There is enormous potential in this network, and that is why I would like to finish this evening's proceedings on a hopeful note. We will take on board the issues raised tonight, and we will use them to develop our work agenda for the coming months and years. We hope to see you again soon, and thank you all very much for coming.



ABOUT THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

The Royal Commonwealth Society is a network of individuals and organisations committed to improving the lives and prospects of Commonwealth citizens across the world.

Founded in 1868, the Society is constituted by Royal Charter and as a charity. It is non-partisan, is independent of governments and is supported by public generosity.

The Society engages with its educational, civil society, business and governmental networks to address issues that matter to the citizens of the Commonwealth.



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY



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