



The Commonwealth Conversation

HOSTED BY THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

PRESS RELEASE - EMBARGOED until Monday 8 March 2010, 00.01 local time

Weakening Commonwealth needs dose of ambition

The largest-ever public consultation on the future of the Commonwealth concludes with a call for bold reform and greater investment if the 54-member association is to avoid being marginalised in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

'An Uncommon Association, A Wealth of Potential', the final report of the Commonwealth Conversation, is published today to coincide with annual Commonwealth Day celebrations around the world.

Once a major player on the world stage, the report argues that the association has neither the clout nor the resources to fulfil its potential. Its official institutions, charged with promoting development and democracy across its member states, have a workforce half a percent of the United Nations and an annual budget one percent of that of the UK Department for International Development. The Secretariat's budget has dropped by 21 percent in real terms within the last twenty years, despite the number of Commonwealth members rising from 48 to 54.

The report also argues that additional funding will be no panacea. The association is perceived as failing to live out its values and principles. Bolder leadership, more ambition and innovation, and a better use of its unique strengths will be crucial to long-term survival.

Run by The Royal Commonwealth Society between July 2009 and March 2010, the Commonwealth Conversation gathered the opinions of tens of thousands of people through a range of methods including a website, opinion polling, surveys, events and online focus groups. Its final report contains ten recommendations for the whole Commonwealth "family":

1. The Commonwealth must "walk the talk" on the values and principles it claims to stand for.
2. The Commonwealth needs stronger leadership if it is to have a meaningful voice on world affairs.
3. The Commonwealth is often seen as anachronistic and fusty. It needs to become bolder and much more innovative in the ways that it works.
4. To attract more investment and correct misperceptions of being largely ceremonial, the Commonwealth needs to prove its worth by measuring and demonstrating its impact.
5. The Commonwealth must stop spreading its limited resources too thinly and instead identify and exploit its unique strengths.

6. Greater investment is needed if the Commonwealth is to fulfil its potential.
7. The Commonwealth is a complex association. It must clearly communicate its identity, purpose and achievements in an accessible way.
8. Lengthy Commonwealth communiqués and statements appear unfocused and unattainable. They must be used to set priorities.
9. The Commonwealth is as much an association of peoples as it is of governments. The interaction between the two requires significant improvement.
10. The Commonwealth is often seen as elitist. It must reach wider, become less insular and engage beyond narrow Commonwealth circles.

Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society, Dr Danny Sriskandarajah said:

“The Commonwealth needs a bold 21st century makeover.

At its founding, Nehru had ambitious hopes that the Commonwealth could bring a “touch of healing” to the world. But, today, the Secretariat’s annual budget is less than what British people spend daily on health and beauty products.

More money will help, but to fulfil its potential, the Commonwealth must make more innovative use of its resources and networks. I hope the results of this consultation will act as the catalyst for change.”

Notes to Editors

Commonwealth Conversation: On 20 July 2009, the RCS launched the ‘Commonwealth Conversation’, the largest-ever public consultation on the future of the Commonwealth. In November 2009, emerging findings were published in a report entitled, ‘**Common What?**’ (This report is available to download [here](#).)

A summary of the final recommendations from the Commonwealth Conversation is attached. This summary and a full final report will be available to download online at www.thecommonwealthconversation.org from 00.01 GMT Monday 8th March 2010.

Over eight months from July 2009 to March 2010, the Commonwealth Conversation involved:

- Nationally representative opinion polls in 7 Commonwealth countries with a combined sample of 6,200
- Nearly 45,000 visits to the website and social media pages from 189 countries, including virtually all Commonwealth countries
- 2,000+ comments via the website, email and post
- Surveys of 1,200 people, including key opinion leaders, in over 40 countries
- 87 events in 26 Commonwealth countries across all regions involving almost 4,000 people
- 11 expert groups on key aspects of the Commonwealth’s work

- 2 bespoke online focus groups involving 31 students from 9 countries in all Commonwealth regions
- Extensive coverage in leading media outlets around the Commonwealth including 24 op-ed pieces and interviews
- Over 350 entries to the 'My Commonwealth' youth competition from under 25 year olds in 24 countries

The Royal Commonwealth Society: Founded in 1868, the RCS conducts a range of events and activities aimed at promoting international understanding. These include educational, youth and cultural programmes, including one of the world's oldest and largest schools essay competitions, and an innovative international youth leadership programme. HM Queen Elizabeth II is Patron and Peter Kellner is Chairman. Headquartered at the Commonwealth Club in London, the RCS has some 5000 members in the UK and a presence in 40 Commonwealth countries through a network of branches and Commonwealth societies. The RCS is a registered charity in England & Wales (226748) See www.thercs.org.

The Commonwealth: The modern Commonwealth was established with 8 members in 1949. In 2010, it has 54 members with a total population of nearly 2 billion. It is an association of governments and peoples, built around shared language, institutions, challenges, aspirations and values. The Commonwealth promotes democracy, development, and diversity within its member countries and across the world.

Commonwealth Day: The results of the Commonwealth Conversation will be released on Commonwealth Day which this year falls on Monday 8th March. To mark this occasion, the Royal Commonwealth Society (on behalf of the Council of Commonwealth Societies) organises an Observance at Westminster Abbey. Britain's largest inter-faith gathering, the Observance will be attended by HM The Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh, HRH The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall. Commonwealth leaders including the current Chairperson-in-office, Prime Minister Patrick Manning of Trinidad and Tobago and the President of the Commonwealth's newest member, Paul Kagame, will also attend. They will be joined in the Abbey by more than 1,000 schoolchildren, as well as hundreds of VIPs. The Commonwealth theme for 2010, and the focus of the Observance, will be 'Science, Technology and Society'. The Queen will lay a wreath at the tomb of Sir Isaac Newton and the UK's Young Scientist of the Year, Peter Hatfield, will conduct a live experiment in the Abbey with leading young scientists from India, Malawi and Kenya.

Statistics

The Commonwealth Secretariat budget for 2009/2010 is approximately £47 million: <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/180412/>

The UK spending on retail health and beauty is approximately £17 billion per annum: <http://www.globalbusinessinsights.com/content/dmvt0533m.pdf>

Contacts:

For all media enquiries, please contact Joanna Bennett on +44 (0) 20 7766 9230 / +44 (0) 7816 221 568 / joanna.bennett@thercs.org, or Danny Sriskandarajah on danny@thercs.org.