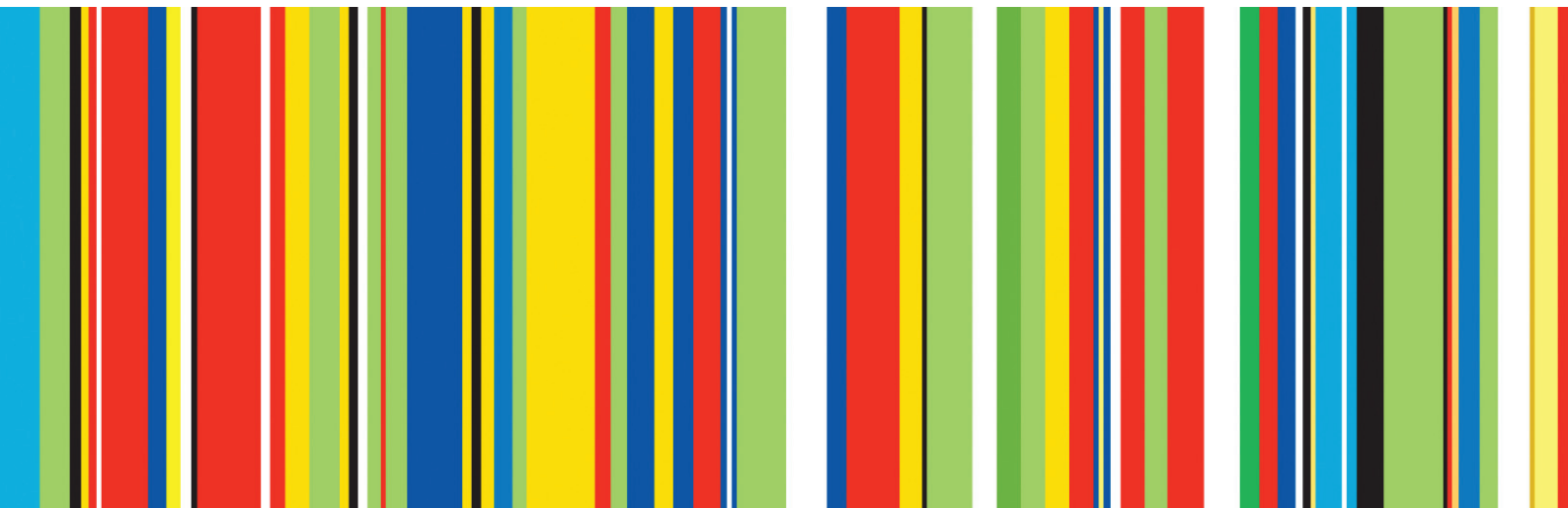


AN UNCOMMON ASSOCIATION A WEALTH OF POTENTIAL

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH CONVERSATION



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The Royal Commonwealth Society
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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This document is a summary of the final recommendations from the Commonwealth Conversation, a public consultation about the future of the Commonwealth run by the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) from July 2009 to March 2010.

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The views expressed in this report are those of its authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Trustees or Members of the RCS, or of the FCO.



DEFINING THE COMMONWEALTH

Given its long history and changing nature, 'the Commonwealth' is not always easy to define. In this report and throughout the Commonwealth Conversation, we have tried to be clear which aspect of the Commonwealth is being referred to, including:

Member States:

All 54 countries that are members of the Commonwealth

Inter-governmental Commonwealth:

The Commonwealth's official organs funded by and serving member states (Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth of Learning)

Commonwealth Civil Society organisations:

The non-governmental organisations that work to promote the Commonwealth, often accredited to the inter-governmental Commonwealth. For a comprehensive list see: www.thecommonwealth.org

Commonwealth 'family':

All organisations, member governments and peoples who work on Commonwealth issues



INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth Conversation was launched in July 2009. In November 2009, we published our emerging findings ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Trinidad and Tobago in a report entitled 'Common What?'. Now, after eight months of consultation, we draw the exercise to a close with the publication of this summary of final recommendations and a full, final Commonwealth Conversation report (available to download online from www.thecommonwealthconversation.org).

Over eight months from July 2009 to March 2010 we:

- Conducted nationally representative opinion polls in 7 Commonwealth countries with a combined sample of 6,200
- Had nearly 45,000 visits to our website and social media pages from 189 countries, including virtually all Commonwealth countries
- Gathered 2,000+ comments via the website, email and post
- Surveyed 1,200 people, including key opinion leaders, in over 40 countries
- Facilitated 87 events in 26 Commonwealth countries across all regions involving almost 4,000 people
- Convened 11 expert groups on key aspects of the Commonwealth's work
- Organised 2 bespoke online focus groups involving 31 students from 9 countries in all Commonwealth regions
- Generated extensive coverage in leading media outlets around the Commonwealth including 24 op-ed pieces and interviews
- Received over 350 entries to the 'My Commonwealth' youth competition from under 25 year olds in 24 countries

We do not pretend that this consultation has been exhaustive. However, it has been the biggest public consultation about the Commonwealth ever undertaken and has involved many online and offline activities. While we have heard much to give us hope, we have also heard more than enough to give us grave cause for concern. Even if one takes a sceptical view of our research (that we only reached a few thousand internet savvy people in the Commonwealth's more developed countries), this still shows that a proportion of the Commonwealth's peoples are unconvinced of the vibrancy and effectiveness of the association. These concerns alone, we believe, should be enough to provoke a response from anyone who cares about the Commonwealth's future.

However, we would never have begun this process if we did not believe that the future of the Commonwealth is one worth investing in. At the end of the Conversation we are more convinced than ever that the Commonwealth has all the ingredients to be a leading, influential and effective international association in the 21st century. Our ten recommendations, summarised in this document, are intended to set out a constructive way forward for the whole Commonwealth family. The time for talk is at an end. Action is now imperative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Live out principles

Our research shows that the majority of people are uncertain what truly distinguishes the Commonwealth today. The association may well have deep historical roots, many shared bonds and an unparalleled diversity; but throughout the Conversation people have asked whether membership of this particular club means anything more substantial. The obvious answer, pointed out most often by expert participants, is that this is a voluntary association based on key principles; that in a crowded international marketplace, the Commonwealth stands out as an organisation based on values. This, we were told, is what sets the Commonwealth apart and will continue to define it in the 21st century.

Yet, if the Commonwealth is about values and principles, much more needs to be done to correct the perception that the association fails to “walk the talk”.

This perceived disconnect between word and action creates cynicism and disillusionment. It also allows misperceptions about what membership of the Commonwealth stands for in today’s world to breed unchecked.

If the Commonwealth is to function as a strong and dynamic association, then all member states must uphold the commitments they have made to democracy, good governance, human rights, freedom of expression, rule of law and sustainable environmental, social and economic development. If they fail to do so, and reject support offered by the intergovernmental Commonwealth, they must also be prepared to accept criticism.

In the same vein, the Commonwealth Secretariat, through the Secretary-General, has a responsibility to speak out when the principles enshrined in the Harare Declaration are transgressed and to act if the violation persists (something addressed in more detail in Recommendation 2). Similarly, Commonwealth civil society bodies have a duty to make their voices heard when they see violations of Commonwealth commitments.

Without this willingness and commitment to see principles upheld, Commonwealth membership is devalued and the association’s identity and purpose diluted. This is not about attempting to enforce black and white absolutes in a world of grey areas. It is about acknowledging that a values and principles-based association that does not consistently strive to defend its ideals risks becoming a meaningless relic.

In this respect, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), a unique strength of the association, is a vital instrument. Yet it is widely criticised for interpreting its broad mandate too narrowly and often failing to take decisive action. It is seen as being too timid and afraid of causing offence, and we have encountered an almost unanimous desire to see it used more effectively.

CMAG is made up of nine rotating Foreign Ministers. It is up to member states – those with representatives currently in the Group, but others also – to see it used to its full potential. The review, endorsed by the 2009 CHOGM, into how CMAG can more effectively fulfil its remit is welcome. There is no doubt that this mechanism, properly used, could go a long way towards turning the Commonwealth into an association that lives out its principles.

Finally, “walking the talk” must also mean the whole Commonwealth family using every opportunity to promote the association’s values and principles through their work, no matter what their field. Commonwealth organisations have networks across all sectors of society, from businesspeople to dentists, from parliamentarians to lawyers and from HIV/AIDS professionals to PHD students. In taking the Commonwealth to the world, they are the frontline. It is crucial that their work brings the Commonwealth’s values to life in a real way.

2. Lead from the front

The Commonwealth needs stronger leadership. Whether it is Heads of Government speaking together, the Chairperson-in-Office representing the association or statements from the Secretary-General, the Commonwealth needs to clear its throat and find a more powerful voice for the world stage.

An obvious place to start would be the post of Secretary-General. The Commonwealth is a vast association of 54 countries; without an active leader at the helm of the Secretariat, the ship is rudderless. Member states choose and appoint the Secretary-General; they must decide what role the Commonwealth needs this person to play. They must choose whether they want a vessel for their consensus messages or a more proactive voice to publicly uphold the association’s values. The former may well be safe and inoffensive, but if the Secretary-General were to adopt a more visible role, it would do a great deal to raise the profile of the Commonwealth, to define its modern identity and, in so doing, to tackle the misperceptions and apathy which surround it.

This is not about seeking a quick headline. Where work can be carried out most effectively behind closed doors, through the Secretary-General's 'Good Offices', then the intergovernmental Commonwealth should take this option. But this should not be used as a catch-all excuse for an overly timid Commonwealth. The need to be seen as a "trusted partner" by member states must be constantly balanced with the need to be trusted to uphold principles, to push for change and not to back down in the face of potential controversy.

The question of Commonwealth Headship also sparked lively discussion throughout the Conversation. It is clear that, whilst the vast majority of people greatly admire the role Queen Elizabeth II has played in uniting the Commonwealth, there is significant debate about whether this role should be passed on to the next British monarch when the time comes. If it were, this would send a powerful message about the identity of the Commonwealth today. More than anything, we have discovered a great desire to see this issue properly and openly debated before circumstances force a snap decision.

Such a debate should also address the role of Chairperson-in-office, a source of considerable confusion even to those within the Commonwealth family. A greater clarification of these three key leadership positions – Chairperson, Secretary-General and Head – and their relationship to one another would be welcome.

It is worth noting, having said this, that an exclusively top-down approach to leadership creates imbalance. More effective Commonwealth leadership could also involve the appointment of Commonwealth Champions or Ambassadors. Having other people sing your praises is far more effective than singing your own.

3. Innovate and be bold

From Australia to Zimbabwe, Port Louis to Port of Spain, many who took part in the Conversation told us that they saw the Commonwealth as anachronistic and fusty; an association with its best days behind it. When asked to list its achievements, none but the most expert of Commonwealth insiders could list anything from the last two decades. At a more mundane level, we were told that many of the systems, working methods, and procedures used by Commonwealth organisations are old fashioned and out of touch.

The most effective way of tackling these perceptions and simultaneously reaching out to a new generation will be for all members of the Commonwealth family to be bolder and more innovative in what they do and how they do it. Initiatives should capture the world's imagination and project a refreshingly modern international organisation rooted in the present, not in the past. Whether in the way the Secretariat conducts its expert groups or the way Commonwealth civil society organisations conduct their programmes, innovation should be the hallmark

of new Commonwealth initiatives. This type of action would be worth more to the Commonwealth than any expensive advertising campaign.

4. Prove worth

We have often heard Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, People's Forums and Ministerial Meetings unfairly dismissed as talk-shops. There is of course considerable value in the unrivalled convening power of the Commonwealth, but the association has to work harder to prove that its achievements go beyond the occasional Summit.

For example, regular updates and reviews of progress made towards the goals set out at these meetings would be helpful. A results-focused culture must also inform the way intergovernmental and non-governmental Commonwealth bodies operate. Measuring and demonstrating impact is essential to attracting more investment. The steps already being taken by the Commonwealth Secretariat in this area are welcome, but we have heard from several key donors and member governments that much more must be done.

Impact must also be effectively communicated to a wider range of stakeholders. The Commonwealth's values and principles can seem idealistic in a results-driven world. When they are translated into tangible change, as they were in shaping positive commitments to emerge from the Copenhagen Climate Conference in late 2009, it is absolutely crucial that these achievements are not allowed to slip silently under the radar.

An evaluation of impact and efficacy should also be built into a more robust civil society accreditation process. This would provide an incentive for Commonwealth organisations to modernise and almost certainly reap the benefits in terms of increased funding. Accreditation to the Commonwealth would be more attractive if it indicated something about the standard of an organisation and guaranteed links into a vibrant, professional network of organisations. Pruning or consolidating the less active Commonwealth civil society bodies would enable a healthier Commonwealth family to flourish.

5. Exploit unique strengths

The intergovernmental Commonwealth operates on a tiny budget in comparison to other international organisations. Its annual budget is 1% of that of the UK Department for International Development. There is an urgent need not to spread these limited resources too thinly. If the Commonwealth is to avoid becoming increasingly marginalised, it must identify ways of working in which it brings unique value and it must maximise this comparative advantage.

Ultimately, it is member states who set the intergovernmental Commonwealth's priorities. They must reassess what functions the Commonwealth can fulfil more effectively than any other multilateral organisation. They must then demand that this is where the intergovernmental Commonwealth focuses its time, expertise and resources in order to produce a clear, targeted mandate and a sharp identity.

At the level of Commonwealth civil society, many disparate interests are a sign of health and vibrancy. And, indeed, civil society bodies by their very nature should be free to focus on any area they wish. However, it is important that they too identify the Commonwealth's unique capacities, particularly when it comes to interacting with the intergovernmental Commonwealth. When Commonwealth civil society come together to present their list of concerns to leaders at Heads of Government Meetings, it would aid their cause if they could identify exactly how the Commonwealth, as opposed to another international association, could make a difference on each issue.

6. Invest

In the twenty years from 1989 to 2009 the budget of the Commonwealth Secretariat (including the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation and the Commonwealth Youth Programme), dropped in real terms by 21 %, even though the number of Commonwealth members increased from 48 to 54. The scale of assessment which determines the contributions made by member states to the Secretariat was finally updated in November 2009, after remaining unchanged for more than twenty years. This is a welcome step in the right direction, but it hasn't changed the size of the pie; it has merely rearranged the slices.

During the Conversation, intergovernmental Commonwealth staff have complained bitterly that they are unable to deliver what member states are asking of them because they are woefully under-resourced. They – and other long-standing observers of the Commonwealth – claim that it is member states who are consigning the Commonwealth to irrelevance by failing to invest.

At the same time, member state governments have told us that they are reluctant to give more money until they see their current contributions being far better utilised. In this respect, Recommendations 4 and 5 are crucial. The intergovernmental Commonwealth must become much smarter about how it maximises the impact and returns on the small resources it does have. Member states and the intergovernmental Commonwealth must also work together to determine exactly what it is that the association can provide that other international organisations cannot. Until this is clear, there is no reason why member states should invest in the Commonwealth and not elsewhere.

Investment in human resources is also crucial. Additional funding is not a panacea.

At the level of Commonwealth civil society, organisations need to become much more ambitious and innovative in sourcing new funds. But investment is also needed at a capacity level. Too many are staffed solely by longstanding volunteers and hindered by old-fashioned working methods. The Commonwealth Foundation provides small core grants to around one third of these Commonwealth associations, but a comprehensive review to map the challenges they face and to identify areas where practical capacity-building could be offered would be welcome. (This should be seen in partnership with a more robust accreditation process, as outlined in Recommendation 4.)

7. Communicate clearly

Throughout the Conversation, we have been struck by how low the Commonwealth's profile is. When we started to dig deeper into the reasons for this, we unearthed some fundamental problems, the most serious of which were nothing to do with publicity, branding or communications. They were a failure to live out principles, a lack of clear leadership, an inability to prioritise or prove impact and a lack of investment in people. Addressing these areas (see Recommendations 1 to 6) would produce a healthier, more dynamic Commonwealth with a strong, modern identity. As a by-product, this would raise the profile of the association which would then feed back into a healthier Commonwealth, driving a virtuous cycle.

Focusing on communications alone is like treating the symptom of a problem and not the cause; like putting a coat of fresh paint over a rotting edifice.

More coherent and effective communication is one important element of a comprehensive approach to long-term revitalisation. We have heard time and again that it is difficult to communicate what the Commonwealth is or does. People tell us that it is many things to many people. It is a hugely complex association of governments and peoples, of shared history and shared goals, of relationships and networks. But, given that we have encountered so much misunderstanding about what the Commonwealth is today, an attempt to restate its purpose and identity in the 21st century, despite this complexity, would seem to be crucial.

Many people have suggested that a Commonwealth Charter could be one effective way of doing this. At the November 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, a Statement of Values and Principles was endorsed by leaders without any public consultation before being released with no public impact. Rather than being a stand alone statement, it refers back to five previous Commonwealth Declarations.

Drawing these messages into one concise, easily understandable document which is endorsed by the full range of Commonwealth stakeholders would be of great value. In terms of words, this would be the one-stop shop for anyone interested in finding out what the Commonwealth stands for today and where it fits into the contemporary global institutional architecture.

We have been struck by how many people within the Commonwealth family remain unconvinced that a low profile matters. They have argued that this problem is shared by all international organisations. Yet unlike others, our research shows that the Commonwealth is lumbered with imperial baggage and misunderstanding. It does not matter that Commonwealth insiders know this perception to be far from the truth – they may have moved on, but our research shows that they have failed to bring the public with them. Everyone in the Commonwealth family must proactively seek to dispel damaging connotations by clearly demonstrating and communicating the association's relevance to our modern world.

We have also been met with the argument, particularly from the intergovernmental Commonwealth, that a low profile amongst the general public is an irrelevance because the association is still reaching its key constituents – the member states. Yet surely a low profile amongst the general public does matter: the Commonwealth is funded by tax payers' money. If electorates don't value it, withdrawing support begins to look relatively easy. Perhaps more importantly still, our research suggests that low profile is not confined to the public alone and that the Commonwealth's reputation amongst governmental constituents is not quite what it should be. An alarming number of key policy makers, when asked, are at a loss to explain what the Commonwealth is for in the 21st century.

Profile matters, but any improved communications strategy will be meaningless unless backed up with the change we call for in Recommendations 1 to 6. Words are important, but they are not sufficient; they must be matched by substantive action.

8. Short is sweet

Lengthy communiqués and statements appear unfocused, impenetrable and unattainable. This is not merely a point about presentation. A concise summary would be more usable by the media and more accessible to the public. But the more important point is about prioritisation, setting clear goals and creating a workable, easy-to-monitor mandate for the Commonwealth at both intergovernmental and civil society levels.

The communiqué issued from the 2009 CHOGM is an interminable list of largely unrelated topics running to 117 paragraphs. None is given prominence over another and there is no indication of a workable agenda for the Secretariat for the

coming two years. And it does not stand alone. There were five other statements produced by leaders at CHOGM, adding another 69 paragraphs to the mêlée.

It is unavoidable that 54 countries will all bring different issues to the table and indeed this sharing of experience is one of the Commonwealth's great strengths. But at some point decisions must be made and priorities must be set. The intergovernmental Commonwealth has finite resources; it cannot solve all of the world's problems.

In terms of civil society statements, the same principles apply. The 2009 Civil Society statement was a mammoth 134 paragraphs. If this document is to be used as a tool for lobbying governments, it must become more focused. Listing every concern lessens the impact of them all. (This is closely linked to Recommendations 4 and 5.)

9. Interact

The Commonwealth is as much an association of peoples as it is of governments. The interaction between the two requires significant improvement.

For an association which prides itself on its commitment to democracy and inclusiveness, a remarkable amount of the intergovernmental Commonwealth's work is carried out behind closed doors. An unrivalled network of civil society and professional bodies carries forward the voice and concerns of the people. They are shut out at risk to the modern relevance of the association.

For this reason, current plans to reform the processes and mechanisms for interaction between civil society and the intergovernmental Commonwealth prior to Heads of Government Meetings are welcome. We heard so many complaints about this during the Conversation that it is obvious there is much to be done.

The Eminent Persons Group, endorsed by leaders at the November 2009 CHOGM and tasked with exploring options for reform, provides an obvious chance for meaningful interaction. The group will operate within an intergovernmental framework. Yet there is significant scope for its members to interact with civil society, to be open and transparent and to draw on the valuable expertise of a broader cross section of Commonwealth stakeholders. If they carry out private consultations before producing a worthy report destined to be filed quietly away, a huge opportunity will have been missed.

The Commonwealth Conversation is testimony to the value of letting people become involved in a process which can effect real change. It has inspired and harnessed enthusiasm and produced ideas which (we hope) will be of lasting value to all Commonwealth stakeholders.

10. Reach more people

Our research has shown that when the Commonwealth's work directly touches the lives of individuals, it has a hugely positive impact. The majority of this kind of work is carried out by Commonwealth civil society bodies that more naturally operate at a grassroots level.

However, we have often heard the Commonwealth described as elitist. Most of its work, at the intergovernmental and non-governmental level, either has no direct impact on the lives of individuals or only reaches the lucky few. Given that people whose lives have been directly affected by Commonwealth initiatives are often the association's most fervent admirers, this is a criticism worth addressing.

This is not to advocate spreading limited resources more thinly. Our research has identified the transformative impact of the Commonwealth's work on the lives of individuals as a key strength. In line with Recommendation 5, this now needs to be maximised. To do this, Commonwealth bodies, and civil society organisations in particular, need to make strategic changes to the way they operate, becoming more outward-looking and less insular, as well as embracing new technology which can broaden reach at little extra cost.

Reaching a wider audience also means reaching beyond Commonwealth circles. We found during our research that non-Commonwealth civil society organisations, including prominent and influential NGOs, were uninterested in Commonwealth meetings and did not view them as useful lobbying opportunities. This says something important about the poor interaction which takes place, as well as hinting that the Commonwealth is perceived as being irrelevant and impotent.

CONCLUSION

Many people have told us that the Commonwealth's great strength is not its intergovernmental bodies, nor even its associated organisations. Rather it is the web of informal ties, shared experience, language, business links, legal frameworks and parliamentary systems that bind together countries with a shared colonial legacy. Yet no matter what happens to the Commonwealth as an international association, these links will remain: they are embedded in members' national psyches. The aim of the Conversation and these recommendations is to ensure that, alongside this organic network there thrives a relevant international association that makes use of these splendid assets.

As we draw to the end of the Commonwealth Conversation, it seems to us that the whole Commonwealth family is faced with a choice: settle for the status quo or aim high. There is much that is right with what the Commonwealth family currently achieves, but there is also much more that could be done.

With some ambition, focused along the lines we have suggested in these recommendations, we are convinced that the Commonwealth can begin to fulfil its potential. At the RCS, we have already started to implement new ways of working based upon all that we have heard. The lessons of the Conversation will guide our activities for years to come. If the same can be said of a broad spectrum of fellow Commonwealth family members, then all our efforts, and those of the many who have contributed so passionately to the Conversation, will not have been in vain.



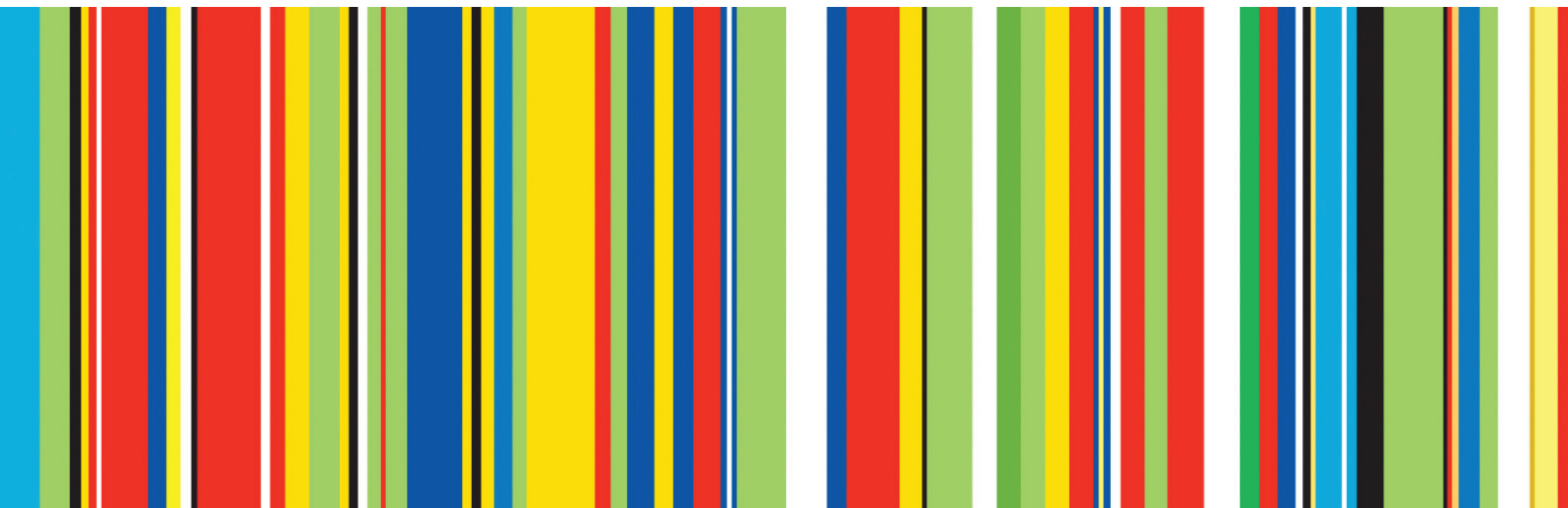
The Commonwealth Conversation

HOSTED BY THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

This report presents a summary of the final recommendations of the Commonwealth Conversation, a global public consultation on the future of the Commonwealth run by the Royal Commonwealth Society between July 2009 and March 2010.

A full, final Commonwealth Conversation report is available to download online from www.thecommonwealthconversation.org

The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) is the oldest and largest civil society organisation devoted to the Commonwealth. Founded in 1868, it conducts a range of events and activities aimed at promoting international understanding. Headquartered at the Commonwealth Club in London, the RCS has some 5,000 members in the UK and a presence in over 40 Commonwealth countries through a network of branches and Commonwealth societies.



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