



**THE COMMONWEALTH:  
A GLOBAL FORCE FOR GOOD?**

**delivered by the**

**Honourable Dr Angelo Farrugia,  
Speaker of the House of Representatives,  
Parliament of Malta**

**at the**

**International Parliamentary Conference on**

**“Human Rights in the modern day Commonwealth:  
Magna Carta to the Commonwealth Charter”**

**5<sup>th</sup> February 2015**



**Rt. Honourable Sir Alan Haselhurst**

**Honourable Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury**

**Honourable Colleagues**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

**Good afternoon**

**I am indeed very honoured to address this distinguished gathering of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly at the closing of this event focusing on human rights. I believe that the safeguard of human rights should be a ubiquitous element in all of our daily activities and since this gathering brings together Members of Parliament from all over the Commonwealth I would like to start by appealing to each and every one of you to always bear in mind the core values and principles of the Commonwealth as declared by its 2012 Charter, to which we, the people of the Commonwealth, have committed ourselves. As legislators in your respective countries I feel that these principles should underpin all of your legislative work.**

**I have been requested to speak today about the future of the Commonwealth and its potential to be a global force for good. At the outset I want to state that I strongly disagree with those who contend that the Commonwealth is a terminally ill patient with little or no future to look to; on the contrary I feel that if used well, the Commonwealth and its organisations are far from a being on their deathbed.**

**One cannot simply look to the future without first looking back at the why the Commonwealth was set up and what it was set up to achieve. This is a journey that takes us back 65 years, when many of us present here were not even born. That the organisation has survived this long is already an achievement in itself; in my opinion this survival was possible in spite of the diversity of its members due to the fact that all members have an equal say regardless of their size or economic stature.**

***(Demographics)***

**As we are all aware, the Commonwealth is home to 2.2 billion citizens – almost a third of the world population – of which over 60% are under the age of 30; compare this with the population of the European Union which currently stands at around 750 million citizens. This contrasts strongly with the situation in Europe and the Western world in general. The EU population size is not only three times smaller than the population of the present Commonwealth, but projections show that ageing coupled with falling fertility rates will continue to characterise the future of Europe. Bearing this in mind, one should immediately realise that with these demographics, the Commonwealth has vast potential for development, growth, private investment and employment.**

*(Small Member States)*

**One other striking characteristic of the Commonwealth is that 31 of its Members (i.e. 58% of its members) are classified as small States with a population of 1.5 million people or fewer.**

**What makes this feature even more striking is the fact that all these small States have an equal voice in this organisation and their views on issues of common interest – such as climate change, susceptibility to natural disasters, environment protection and gender equality, to mention but a few – carry equal weight as those of the larger member countries.**

**The Commonwealth Charter affirms the role of our organisation as “a recognised intergovernmental champion of small States, advocating for their special needs; providing policy advice on political, economic and social development issues; and delivering technical assistance”. Therefore, the message conveyed by the Charter affirms that the divergences that often exist between the member countries are not to be considered as divisive but an incentive for convergence.**

**Coming from a small island myself, I speak with satisfaction about Malta’s offer to host the pioneering initiatives of the Small States Centre of Excellence and the Small States Trade Financing Facility. The Centre, endorsed by the Commonwealth leaders in November 2013 in Colombo, aims to impart targeted capacity-building programmes and interventions in the areas of democracy and development. Malta has already pledged to support these initiatives by providing human resources and infrastructure for the Centre and in this regard I appeal to you, parliamentarians of the Commonwealth, to voice your support with your Governments to ensure its successful establishment. I mention these two initiatives as only two of the concrete ways in which the Commonwealth can continue to prove its effectiveness and relevance.**

*(The relevance of the Commonwealth in the promotion of Human Rights)*

**The 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Magna Carta should serve as an occasion to stop and think about how the development of human rights to what we know now has been the cornerstone of the liberty and democracy we enjoy. But an anniversary should not be just an occasion for us to reminisce and gloat on our achievements. As part of a wider Commonwealth reform, 2015 is a good time to look forward and determine what still needs to be done.**

**One should keep in mind that the Commonwealth is not simply an inter-governmental organisation, meeting every two years and adopting political conclusions from one meeting to the other. As members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, you are certainly well-aware of the contribution of the parliamentary dimension of the Commonwealth. The CPA election observation missions are only one concrete example of the tools available to us.**

**In this respect, I must declare my appreciation for the express belief of the Rt Honourable Sir Alan Haselhurst that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association needs to have a voice**

stronger in the fight against human rights abuses, no matter how uncomfortable this could be for some of us. I cannot but agree with Sir Alan, and I am sure that I am not alone in this.

As part of a wider Commonwealth reform, to which I will return shortly, I feel that for this organisation to be a true promoter and guardian of the rights of its citizens, as set out in the Harare Declaration, it requires a centralised organ responsible for ensuring the respect of this set of core values across all its territories. Two models come to mind, namely:

- one based on the United Nations Human Rights Council, which would be responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights in the member countries and for addressing situations of human rights violations and make recommendations on them; or
- based on the Council of Europe's European Court of Human Rights with which individuals or groups of individuals could lodge their complaints against Member States on breaches of human rights issues, not satisfactorily resolved in the home country.

I believe that a Commonwealth Human Rights Council would be the most appropriate first step.

Due credit should also be given the work of civil society as another tier of the Commonwealth. With the right financial and technical assistance, non-governmental organisations are very well-placed to bring into fruition the principles on which the Commonwealth is founded. As an organisation, it has differed from others which over the years have been riddled with political divisions and power struggles. The Commonwealth has proven to be a forum which is much more than a talking shop; it is very well placed to be a forum which provides an opportunity for all the members to learn from each other and explore opportunities for collaboration.

On the subject of human rights, which you have debated at length over the past couple of days, the work of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, in advocating for better respect, protection and promotion of international human rights standards and in ensuring greater adherence to the Commonwealth Harare principles, comes to mind as a tangible result of this collaboration.

*(Commonwealth Reform)*

Mr Chair  
Madame Chairperson  
Honourable Colleagues  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Last year, the Commonwealth celebrated the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary from when it was formally established in 1949. To date it comprises 53 member countries spanning across all six inhabited continents, namely Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific. However, it may seem ironic, or perhaps even illogical at first, that, in addition to former ties with Great Britain, the most significant common factor across the members is in fact their own diversity. And the fact

that this organisation – being one of the world’s oldest political associations of States – has survived this long is surely a sign of success. However, it is not enough to pat ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves on a job well done.

Over the past 65 years the political and social tapestry of the world has evolved greatly. Great technological advancements - the scale of which has not been experienced since the industrial revolution, especially those made possible since the advent of the internet – have, metaphorically speaking, brought the whole world to our fingertips.

I am confident that all of us here have brought along at least one mobile device on which we can access our emails, keep in touch with our friends and family, and with a few clicks know what is going on all over the world in real time. Better communication and connectivity have also meant that people have become more mobile, making it increasingly easy to establish and foster relationships, both for personal as well as for trade and investment purposes.

Many have argued that, in this ever changing world, the Commonwealth has become irrelevant, or that it is not fit for its purpose. It is against this backdrop that any reforms must be planned. The Report of the Eminent Persons Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government adopted in Perth in October 2011 has launched this process. The first tangible step resulting from this report was the adoption in 2013 of the Commonwealth Charter. Whilst this new Charter goes a long way in reaffirming the core principles which guide the work of the Commonwealth, the reform needs to go further. We have to look at our organisation and the aims it intends to achieve; from this exercise, we then need to evaluate which model of organisation would be more conducive to achieve these aims. However, the challenges facing the Commonwealth are not any different from the challenges faced by any other inter-governmental institution.

Allow me to refer to the speech by the Prime Minister of Malta, the Honourable Dr Joseph Muscat, which he delivered at the London School of Economics in July last year on the future of the Commonwealth. In his address, the Prime Minister proposed three options for the reform of the Commonwealth:

- The first option would be by *“disbanding the Commonwealth as it is today and regrouping, setting out updated guidelines and Charter of Values to which participants must strictly abide.”* Such a step would raise the issues of membership (assuming that the embryonic ties to Britain are abandoned) and of the possibility of consensual withdrawal.
- The second option that has been mooted is to have a multi-speed Commonwealth. This option is based on the extreme divergences between some of the 53 members – compare and contrast the population of Tuvalu (at around 10,000) and that of India (1.2 billion); compare and contrast the UN Human Development Index of Malawi (ranked at 170) and that of the United Kingdom (ranked at 26). A reformed multi-speed Commonwealth could informally regroup the 53 members according to set criteria effectively creating sub-groups of countries with similar characteristics who could work together to address common problems and achieve common goals. According to the Maltese Prime Minister, *“Members of this new Commonwealth could decide to adhere to strict rules, from democracy to gender equality, from religious freedom to minority rights (including LGBTI issues), from transparency to environmental sustainability. These rules should be much*

*more stringent than the current Charter, with membership coming after close scrutiny, and screening being an ongoing process.”*

- The third option for reform is a development of the multi-speed model which is more formalised on the basis of the *“ingrained differences between different groups of countries, and the creation of even more divisions.”* In this model, an improved Commonwealth could *“engage in more regular and dynamic exercises by means of which each and every country is offered more political and technical assistance”,* with programmes *“specifically intended to nudge towards better governance and more open societies, fostering convergence rather than divergence.”*

I feel that the decision to open up membership of the Commonwealth to countries without a British colonial past or constitutional link to Great Britain – here I refer to Mozambique and Rwanda that joined in 1995 and 2009 respectively – is a sign of the path the organisation intends to follow.

If you will allow me, in this respect, I would like to speak briefly about the fact that in September 2008 Rwanda became the first nation in the world to elect a majority of women parliamentarians: 45 of the 80 members of the Chamber of Deputies, a number which further increased to 51 in the September 2013 election. Another positive experience to think about in this respect is that of Cameroon, where in the 2013 election 53 female MPs were elected out of a total of 180 MPs in comparison to 1 female MP from 100 in 1960. This was achieved by means of a provision in the electoral code which provides the need for political parties to respect gender balance in selecting candidates for election.

I have no doubt that the majority of us here come from Parliaments where the proportion of male MPs is much greater than female MPs – this is a learning opportunity for all of us. The experiences of Rwanda and Cameroon serve as food for thought and are evidence that differences between us are not necessarily divisive issues but can be used by all of us as learning opportunities.

*(Way forward)*

Mr Chair  
Madame Chairperson  
Honourable Colleagues  
Ladies and Gentlemen

As I said at the beginning of my address, the Commonwealth still has room to not only survive but also to grow. For the Commonwealth to remain relevant, it has to sever its underlying dependency on ties with Britain – and please do not misinterpret me on this. By severing ties with Britain I do not mean that we should discard everything British and go our own separate ways. The examples of Mozambique and Rwanda are evidence of this way forward. Britain, with its history in championing the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, will always remain a central reference point, like it has been over the past decades.

I am not here to tell you which would be the best option for reform from any of the models I described earlier, or any other. The Commonwealth is only as relevant, as we, its members,

want it to be. We need to focus on a common agenda. We can build new ideas and new mechanisms to strengthen the relationship that binds its Members. Any viable solution that secures the commitment of all involved is one that finds a balance between the interests of its Member States and the collective interest of the Commonwealth.

*(The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2015)*

The Commonwealth Secretary General Kamallesh Sharma has described Malta as a model Commonwealth country which will, for the second time in 10 years, become chair of our family of nations. As I am sure that everyone present here knows, the next CHOGM will be held in Malta between 27 and 29 November this year. The theme of this year's meeting has been carefully chosen, bearing in mind the importance of the 2015 Summit to deliver a sense of unity and collaboration among the Commonwealth member countries. 'The Commonwealth – Adding Global Value' will seek to promote positive, active and forward-looking dialogue aimed at paving a way towards enhancing the Commonwealth as a relevant, important and global actor in the international arena. With a strengthened role, the Commonwealth can raise the voices of those member countries who on their own would struggle to make their voices heard.

*(Parliamentary Dimension of the CHOGM)*

As I speak before you today on what I believe the future of the Commonwealth should be, I cannot conclude my address without referring to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I firmly believe that Commonwealth parliamentarians constitute an invaluable resource as they all can take back to their Parliaments and Governments a greater recognition of the power that the Commonwealth has to act as a force of good in the world.

It is for this reason that I have been in contact with both the new Chairperson of the Executive Committee, the Honourable Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, and the Prime Minister of Malta, the Honourable Dr Joseph Muscat, in order to work together to find a way to include the views and opinions of the Parliamentarians of Commonwealth countries on issues of common interest in the agenda of the Heads of Governments Meeting later this year.

This opportunity, to bring to the fore the voices of the people of the Commonwealth, is surely not one to be dismissed. This and the various opportunities for collaboration which I have referred to, on the premise of deep organisational reform, are – in my opinion – the way forward for the Commonwealth if it wants to remain relevant to the people it represents and be a true global force for good.

Thank you.