

Notes for an Address

The Art of the Possible

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It is an honour for me to make my first intervention as Canada's Special Envoy on Commonwealth Renewal here in Malta and to each of you, whose professional lives are at the heart of open, honest and forthright sharing of information. First, because Malta has been and remains a deeply persuasive and constructive force for Commonwealth renewal, a mission and a stance that Canada shares and admires; second, because the role of journalists across the Commonwealth in encouraging Commonwealth renewal, through your profession and competence has never mattered more.

I am also honoured to be representing Canada as its Special Envoy in this, the Jubilee Year. I was eight years old, sitting on my Dad's shoulders when I first saw Her Majesty during her 1959 tour at her stop in Montreal. I watched her shake hands and share a few words with all the local clergy, Catholic and Orthodox Priests, various protestant Ministers and the Rabbi of our local synagogue. The Head of the Church of England shaking hands with a Rabbi struck me, in 1950's Montreal. Struck me as quite a gesture. I eventually came to understand

that we were all equal under the Crown – free to practice our own faiths, lucky to live in Canada. 51 years later, I am convinced more than ever, that, in the sixtieth year of Queen Elizabeth II's reign there is continued value in reflecting on the importance of dynamic symbols in societies where freedom of religion, cultural diversity and civility still matter.

Last year, our Prime Minister was asked a question after the release of the LLRC report relating to Sri Lanka. His response at the time was that “based on what he knew at that moment, he would not be going to Colombo in 2013”. This was not, what I would call, a planned political response but rather a gut reaction response to an honest question by a journalist immediately after the release of the report. But I think it does imply a little bit of the government of Canada’s search for a relationship throughout the Commonwealth that is about principled rights, development and economic opportunity and technical assistance and not about hypocrisy. There are little bits of hypocrisy in every international organization – some in most governments and political parties and possibly even in the odd news organization. The point is that

when hypocrisy has the risk of overtaking the perceived purpose and direction is when we begin to have problems. That was essentially what the EPG saw as its remit when the Heads of Government in Port-of-Spain asked for this group to be formed and to look at what was needed to increase the footprint of the Commonwealth, its impact and its real support for 2.1 billion citizens.

I am delighted to be making my first formal statements as Canada Special Envoy for Commonwealth Renewal here in Malta because Malta has been a strong force in the Commonwealth by its example and has also been a strong supporter of the EPG recommendations, recognizing the need for Commonwealth renewal and reform. Canada appreciates Malta's incredible cooperation and we are pleased to follow in Malta's leadership footsteps.

As the Canadian member of the Eminent Persons Group, I signed and vigorously supported all 106 recommendations we submitted to the Commonwealth Heads of Government 2011 meeting in Perth last October. Over 18 months and five meetings, this 10 member group

studied more than 300 submissions, heard from dozens of witnesses together and in our own countries, debated, discussed and sometimes argued the way forward for the Commonwealth. We were from different faiths, backgrounds, generations, races, professions, geographies and cultures. But in the end, every word of “*A Commonwealth of the People: Time for Urgent Reform*” was agreed to unanimously. The diversity around the table spoke to the diversity of the organization itself and each and every recommendation was thought out and included because we believed it would make the Commonwealth of Nations a more relevant organization for the 21st century. In Perth, along with several EPG colleagues, I was also part of the press conference that deplored the non-release of the report until the last day of that conference. Commonwealth renewal is not a private process for diplomats and advisors. It belongs to all the peoples of the Commonwealth, as does the Commonwealth itself.

The heritage and most compelling prospects of, and for, the Commonwealth are about a dynamic meaning for the values of civility

that underline the Commonwealth experience. That civility embraces, as Commonwealth leaders have proclaimed on many occasions, the rule of law, democracy, human rights and economic opportunities for every one of our 2.1 billion Commonwealth citizens. Long ago, before it was a fashionable axiom of international development, the Commonwealth proclaimed that development required democracy to hold governments accountable and democracy required development if people throughout our countries were to have the chance to build lives and societies of civility and opportunity. As a former EPG member, I would, of course, have preferred that more than 30 EPG recommendations were approved in Perth plus the other 9 CMAG reform recommendations concerning the Ministerial Action Group, also approved in Perth, had been passed. In my present Envoy role, I am grateful for the work that was done and for what did pass. And as Canada's Special Envoy, I recognize the need to work collaboratively to get many more recommendations to the implementation stage. Might I add I am also resolutely optimistic. And, just so we are clear, there is a big difference between being optimistic, and being naïve.

My new role, and Canada's decision to appoint a Special Envoy, underlines my country's belief that more must be done and that the 12 EPG recommendations, approved in principle but awaiting detailed costing, and the other 43 recommendations awaiting more detailed consideration, must not be allowed to die in the long grass. Canada's view is that three months have passed already since Perth and the pace of work on the recommendations undergoing study or costing must pick up! Some modest steps have been made and good people in the Commonwealth Secretariat are valiantly advancing the file. And I have the Secretary General's commitment to real progress in real time – which I appreciate very much and which Canada very much expects. The EPG report called for urgent reform, not gradual, endlessly bureaucratic, pretend reform where events and exigencies overwhelm the very relevance and purpose of the Commonwealth itself. A reticent Secretariat, or one that moves too slowly, will quickly become a part of the problem. My discussions with the Secretariat since being appointed give me genuine hope that its engagement may be more robust and less sleepy than in the past. An engaged, agile and determined Secretariat,

working tirelessly to bring these recommendations and costings into the public domain is what subscription paying nations have the right to expect. Complacency in defence of Commonwealth values is no virtue; courage in support of renewing the Commonwealth is no vice. It would be good to see the Secretariat adopt this stance publicly and soon! The art of the possible by taking the Perth EPG recommendations forward is in no way served by even the hint of inertia.

An important step ahead in Perth was the unanimous and rapid approval of the recommendations that strengthen the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, its mandate and trigger points for engagement and action. To the credit of CMAG's former Chair, the Foreign Minister of Ghana, and that of all Commonwealth Foreign Ministers and Heads of Government, the CMAG report received broad consensual support.

CMAG, which has a rotating membership and chair, and no "permanent five", is really the body that decides on sanctions, other options and good offices assistance to Commonwealth member states in a way that respects the sovereignty of all member states, while

protecting the core values of rule of law, democracy and human rights. CMAG's role, along with the Secretary General, in deploying the proposed Commissioner or High Representative for Rule of Law, Democracy and Human Rights (EPG recommendation number 2) is not diminished by the proposed new officer in any way. Nor is the role of the Commonwealth Committee of the Whole, or the de facto Board of Directors, made up of High Commissioners in London, in sorting through operational budget decisions based on advice from the Secretary General and his or her staff. There is a way forward on this proposal and it is important that we do not let exaggerated fears about this new official, or unjustified angst about a more engaged Secretariat, block that road.

For Canada and many of our Commonwealth colleagues, human rights are neither divisible nor geographically eligible for dilution. The right to be a Muslim in Canada is inviolate, as should be the right to be Christian in Pakistan, or Jewish in South Africa or agnostic in Barbados. The right of people who are infected with HIV/AIDS in Commonwealth

Africa, or any other lethal virus anywhere in the Commonwealth, to rapid and life-saving treatment cannot be tenuous because of dated colonial laws that criminalize homosexuality – thereby creating huge risks to self-identification for those who need treatment. Some have suggested that human rights and the idea of a Commissioner is a new form of old style imperialism. We have a term in French Canada for that – it's called piffle. Let me suggest that still enforcing anti-homosexual laws that in many Commonwealth countries are themselves ancient colonial remnants of other centuries, is a kind of retroactive imperialism of the worst kind. I know of no religious text anywhere in the world that says people whose illness and death could be prevented by timely treatment should be allowed to die. That is not a Commonwealth value, a Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh or Christian value. Allowing people to die unnecessarily is a violation of everything we all hold dear. Nor should the Commonwealth, as a values-based, free association of sovereign states, by silence or inaction, allow human beings to die unnecessarily. That stance would be neither diplomatic nor pragmatic. It would be cruel and inhumane if not insensitive and cowardly. Every

country sets its own laws and makes its own choices. We respect that. The Commonwealth cannot legislate, nor should it. But it can advocate, promote and advance a view and policy goal against forced marriage, against racism and oppression and against destructive homophobia. One of your colleagues asked me what it is she could do and the answer is simple. The Commonwealth, through you its journalists, should speak up and speak out. Too much silence in the face of too much injustice may lead to the following question: what makes silence the better option? Not speaking out is never the right option.

Canada was delighted when Heads approved the EPG recommendation number 18 that proclaimed critical declarations made at previous CHOGM meetings on democracy, human rights, development and trade as "fundamental Commonwealth values" upon which the Secretary General should be free to speak out without prior consultation. That recommendation was the subject of much discussion at the EPG meeting in Kuala Lumpur in February, 2011. The press

release after the Malaysian deliberations was entitled "Silence is not an Option" for good reason.

I was pleased, as were many who know Kamalesh Sharma, that he was re-appointed Secretary General. I consider the SG a friend. I look forward to hearing his voice speaking out on Commonwealth values for many years in the future. Prime Minister Harper has met with the Secretary General on numerous occasions. Recent reports in the Economist newspaper quoting the SG on Fiji – the inclusive steps necessary to a legitimate transition from military government, through constituent assembly, to a new constitution and democratic elections were clear, compelling and spot on. We need to hear more – on Zimbabwe, on human rights, on religious freedom, on forced marriages imposed on young girls, on the grinding poverty suffered by so many of our Commonwealth brothers and sisters. The Commonwealth voice has never mattered more.

CHOGM 2011 was a watershed moment for the future of the Commonwealth. I know Prime Minister Harper worked very hard

toward the approval of important EPG recommendations – including delaying his departure from Perth for several hours to do so. The determination of our Foreign Minister, John Baird to broach a focused discussion on human rights, on continuing questions about Sri Lanka and the many unaccounted-for-disappeared should be seen as a clear statement of Canada's deep commitment to religious freedom, human rights and the rule of law.

Canada is no fair weather friend to the Commonwealth. Over our history, whether it was in our aid to Sri Lanka through the Colombo Plan in the-then Ceylon, the support of the front line states against apartheid by Prime Ministers Trudeau and Mulroney, despite Mrs. Thatcher's and Mr. Reagan's very different views, or the championing of the Commonwealth Scholarships by Mr. Diefenbaker, the three decades of peacekeeping in Cyprus and our support through CIDA of technical assistance in Africa, Pakistan, India and the Caribbean, Canada has been a loyal and generous supporter.

In these difficult financial times, defending Commonwealth values is very necessary and doing so through a Secretariat that provides value for money by actually being engaged also remains important.

Too many of our Commonwealth brothers and sisters live in poverty, too much trade opportunity is lost, too many rights and freedoms are, in some Commonwealth countries, undefended.

For those EPG recommendations approved in Perth, we need implementation plans that are granular, detailed and moving ahead as soon as possible. For those in the costing mode – the 12 that include: the reform of the Secretariat’s structure; a dialogue with the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank to assist small states; annual meetings of the Ministerial Group on Small States; a renewed commitment to the Iwokrama Rainforest programme; the establishment of national mechanisms, such as national youth councils, to get the views of young people; the authorization of the Secretary-General to work with UN bodies, such as UNAIDS, the World Health Organisation and UNDP; and a mandate to

the SG to prepare a draft plan on which the Secretariat's work and its future development would be focused, we need costings that are reasonable and agreed to by the Task Force established for that purpose and scheduled to meet this spring. And for the ones where more detail is required, close to 40, we must guard against the long grass of pusillanimous dithering, surely the greatest existential threat the Commonwealth faces.

India's democracy in Asia; Singapore's economic success; Australia's robust democratic and economic achievements or Malaysia's moderation in diversity, are serious Asian Commonwealth voices for those values. None among them or any other Commonwealth group of countries is perfect. But their direction and underlying values are clear. We live in a time when our Chinese friends, economically powerful and quite legitimately seeking to broaden their global access to resources, UN votes and to create a broader canvass on which they can export goods and services, is a global geopolitical reality. Economic and social progress in China is a marvel to behold – the Chinese deserve great

credit. Democracy and human rights however, despite all the many successful aspects of China's progress, is not one of their areas of great development. In Africa, the Caribbean or Asia, where Chinese influence and investment is growing massively, we must not dilute the Commonwealth stance on democracy and human rights. We must, with our Commonwealth brothers and sisters of all races, creeds, colours and nationalities stand our ground.

Commonwealth values, the protection and support for human rights, democracy and rule of law; the voluntary consensus-based association of 54 nations encompassing 2.1 billion people; and the equal voices of the populace and powerful as well as the small and economically struggling nations is an example for the world and should be embraced a such. On human rights, the rule of law and democracy the Commonwealth is, can and should continue to be a compelling force for good. This is no time for it to stand down or stand aside. It is now time, in a surefooted, informed and collegial way, to take the Perth

recommendations and forge, in a mutually respectful way and in our common spirit, toward the next vital steps ahead!

Thank you all very much