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THE COMMONWEALTH AFTER HARARE

At the request of the Institute, Prof. Margaret Doxey, of the Department of Political Studies, Trent University in Canada, wrote this Brief Report. Professor Doxey observed the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Harare, Zimbabwe. She has published widely on Commonwealth affairs.

The rapidly changing international environment confronts not only governments but international organisations of which they are members with new situations and challenges, and the Commonwealth is certainly no exception. A body whose membership is made up of Britain and 49 other independent states¹, all of whom had some colonial tie with Britain or one of the old Dominions, its preoccupations over the past 40 years have been decolonization, economic development and the elimination of white minority rule in southern Africa. Southern Africa has proved the most divisive of these issues; South Africa was forced to withdraw from membership in 1961 and at different times over the next three decades first Rhodesian UDI and then South Africa's apartheid policies placed the Commonwealth under heavy strain.

Zimbabwe became independent in 1980 and in the ensuing years calls for sanctions to end apartheid dominated the Commonwealth agenda. British policy had been the object of Third World pressure from the outset, but from 1985 a sharp division opened between Britain and all other Commonwealth members, with Australia, Canada and New Zealand siding with the majority on the need for comprehensive sanctions against South Africa. A series of Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings (CHOGMs) at Nassau (1985), Vancouver (1987) and Kuala Lumpur (1989), plus the 1986 London mini-summit which considered the report of the Eminent Persons Group after its mission to South Africa, presented the picture, especially in media reports, of a single-issue organisation.

In fact, this image did less than justice to the substantial and useful range of activities conducted under Commonwealth auspices and coordinated by the Commonwealth Secretariat, established in 1965. Functional cooperation embraces initiatives in education and training, in law, health, youth and womens' affairs, and

in economic assistance. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), established in 1971, with 60% of its funding coming from Canada and Britain, has performed well, albeit on a small scale, in providing cost-effective and appropriate expertise for developing countries who are desperately short of skilled manpower. And for the numerous very small states who belong to the Commonwealth (24 have populations of less than one million) the Secretariat offers a range of invaluable services.

By 1989 it was clear that some reappraisal of the Commonwealth's future roles was a prerequisite to its continuing relevance. The collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, and of the Soviet Union itself, with communism discredited as a political and economic system and the West offering the sole source of aid, gave new impetus to calls for democracy and observance of human rights throughout the world. In addition, there were overtures to join the Commonwealth from Mozambique and Cameroun. Consideration of such requests and of applications to rejoin which might come from Fiji (and perhaps South Africa?) would require some criteria of eligibility. And once the pace of change in South Africa began to speed up, the need for a more constructive Commonwealth approach in the region was underlined.

At the 1989 Kuala Lumpur summit a High-Level Appraisal Group of ten heads of government² was charged with the task of addressing the role(s) of the Commonwealth for the 1990s and beyond, and of reviewing its structures. The work was done by a group of ten senior officials and former officials, chaired by Lord Armstrong, the former British Cabinet Secretary. Their report was presented to the Harare meeting and was issued, after some revision, as the Harare Commonwealth Declaration. This rather unwieldy document, which supersedes the 1971 Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, is notable for its emphasis on fundamental human rights and for a specific commitment to "just and honest government" (para #9). This is rhetorical but a necessary first step which provides a benchmark against which Commonwealth governments can be held accountable - possibly by other members and certainly by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

It is no longer good enough for Commonwealth governments to advocate human rights and democratic values elsewhere while ignoring their own shortcomings or failings. The Amin regime in Uganda should not have been tolerated in silence until 1977 and no repetition of such acquiescence is possible today. Of course, it remains to be seen how far the Commonwealth convention of non-comment on members' affairs can be modified, but at least a standard has now been set. The Canadian and British governments have also made it clear their aid

will not be given to governments violating human rights³.

The Harare CHOGM was notable for the low emphasis on South Africa, which reflected the wishes of the host government as well as other members. African National Congress President Nelson Mandela, was invited to attend by President Mugabe and gave a press conference but 'Britain-bashing' which had been such a feature of previous CHOGMs, with Mrs. Thatcher trenchantly defending her policy stance, was conspicuous by its absence. The difference of opinion on sanctions was now over the pace of lifting them, and as the European Community has already removed them, as has the United States to a large extent⁴, and the Commonwealth agreed to the removal of people-to-people sanctions and the phased lifting of others, the issue was rather peripheral. Mr. Mandela himself commented that the British Prime Minister was doing "his utmost best" to assist the process of normalizing the situation in South Africa, adding that he had met him at the Conference and on a previous occasion and talked to him regularly on the telephone.

Commonwealth leaders noted that the terms of a constitutional settlement were for South Africans to decide for themselves, but they decided to send the Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, to South Africa to see if any assistance with the negotiating process would be helpful. Chief Anyaoku, an experienced and skilful diplomat, who played a key role in the Eminent Persons Group, wasted no time in carrying out this mandate. He arrived in South Africa on 30 October and spent the next week talking to political leaders and other groups and individuals.⁵ He will report to the High-Level Appraisal Group, now augmented by Zimbabwe. This Group includes Britain, while the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa (CFMSA) is chaired by Canada and does not.

The most remarkable change at Harare for one who has 'observed' three CHOGMs at close quarters, was the resumption of a leadership role by Britain. Always a key member, and the source of 30% of the Commonwealth's funds, its isolation over South Africa was anomalous. It was, of course, Britain's importance which made it the object of Commonwealth pressure. More to the point today than differences over sanctions is Britain's ability to take initiatives in the G7 or Paris Club or EC, or unilaterally, which can assist Third World countries who are in dire economic straits. Prime Minister Major's offer to implement the Trinidad and Tobago Terms which mean writing off 2/3 of the debt of 20 of the world's poorest countries, including Tanzania and Zambia, was warmly welcomed at Harare. It is also worth mentioning that his personality was conducive to amity and courteous exchanges of views. Thoroughly briefed, imperturbable, humorous and avowedly pro-Commonwealth, he would have been a hard man to quarrel with. The contrast

in style with that of his predecessor, whose policies on South Africa he has not abandoned, could not have been more marked.

Media attention at Harare was largely directed to undemocratic regimes within the Commonwealth. The CHOGM also endorsed the continuation of 'bread and butter' work in functional cooperation, and a collective approach to problems of the environment, the spread of AIDS and drug trafficking and abuse. These efforts do not make headlines but they do make a direct contribution to improving the quality of many people's lives.

The next CHOGM will be held in Cyprus in 1993. The only certainty is that it will be a shorter meeting, although the traditional 'retreat' for leaders will probably be preserved as it has proved a useful mechanism for private consultation and informal exchange of views. The next two years will be critical in establishing whether a post-apartheid Commonwealth as well as a post-apartheid South Africa can look forward with some confidence to the 21st Century.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Commonwealth also includes a number of non-self-governing territories.
2. Australia, Bahamas, Britain, Canada, India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Singapore, Zambia.
3. A coded reference to this linkage can be found in para #9 of the Harare Declaration which refers to "extending the benefits of development within a framework of respect for human rights".
4. And Japan immediately after the Conference.
5. The South African Institute of International Affairs, for instance, brought together a group of academic analysts, senior journalists and political figures for a discussion with Chief Anyaoku of South Africa's future and the role of the Commonwealth.