

**THE RT HON SIR JOHN MAJOR, KG, CH
COMMONWEALTH 60TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER
LORD'S
WEDNESDAY, 14 OCTOBER, 2009**

When the Secretary General proposed this dinner, he brought together two institutions that inter-link and endure.

Cricket, of course, is 400 years older than the Commonwealth but it continues to provide the cement that keeps together fifty-three diverse nations of varying size and wealth, across Continents and Oceans. Often, their interests converge, sometimes they collide, but they all share a common affection for cricket.

I once tried to explain cricket to an American President – and his eyes glazed over. He found it hard to comprehend a game that could last *five days* – but with no positive result. I tried with Boris Yeltsin, too, over a large vodka. *His* eyes glazed over too, although – just perhaps – that was due to the vodka. But in the Commonwealth – the pace of cricket fits with the rhythm of life.

The Commonwealth was born out of the break up of an Empire when common ideals, shared interests and age old sentiment saw virtue in a loose association of nations. Today, some people doubt its relevance – but they are wrong to do so.

The Commonwealth has values in common: democracy, freedom, the rule of law. It promotes social and economic development – especially in the 32 Member States with populations of less than 1½ million.

The well-being of Nations often hangs on the affection between populations and even on relations between individuals in Government.

In our hard-headed, materialistic world, some think such a judgement is pure nostalgia for an age that never existed. I disagree. A Commonwealth gathering is more intimate, more friendly, than a meeting of the G20 or United Nations – and far less bloody than the European Council. Arguments may be fierce, but consensus is usually possible. It is more like an extended family than quarrelling neighbours.

But there *is* nostalgia in the musings of cricket lovers: where, in the Commonwealth, have you *not* heard arguments about the relative merits of cricketers – often long dead before those arguing were born? Was Victor Trumper better than Hobbs? Or Learie Constantine a greater match winner than the Nawab of Pataudi? Discuss and enjoy.

Across the Commonwealth, sport has a role, evident every four years in the Commonwealth Games. The ancient Greeks understood the value of sport – and so does the Commonwealth. And in the Commonwealth, the King of Sports is cricket. I rarely had a meeting with a Caribbean leader – or an Indian or a Pakistani – without it featuring. Good-natured banter prevailed over political wariness.

With Australians, cricket was almost a formal agenda item and with South Africa and New Zealand it jostled with Rugby for a share of the time. Nelson Mandela once told me that one of the first questions he asked on leaving Robben Island was: “Is Don Bradman still alive”.

At the Commonwealth Conference in Harare in 1991, we held a cricket match. I opened the batting at the Wanderers Ground with Bob Hawke, then Prime Minister of Australia. The ground was overflowing but, to prevent swollen heads among the politicians, it was made clear to us that the spectators had come to see their local hero, Graeme Hick. To them – and how wise they were – cricket mattered a good deal more than politics!

Our time on that pitch revealed some national characteristics: Hawke stole the bowling unmercifully and when – after 10 Overs – we were ushered off the pitch to – and I quote the Umpire – “make way for the *real* cricketers”, I asked Bob if he’d known we were only due to have a brief time at the wicket. Looking – only a little shifty – he replied: “Jeez, yes, John, didn’t I tell you?”. Believe me, the Aussies are tough competitors – on and off the cricket field.

Cricket and politics have many similarities. Apart from nostalgics, they attract pessimists. As long ago as 1932, C.P. Snow was complaining: “These days, a man of taste can only go to an empty ground and regret the past!”. The same dreary view can often be heard today.

For some, the past is always the Golden Age. In the 1930s, Neville Cardus once wrote of falling asleep at Lord’s to the complaints of an elderly spectator that cricket “wasn’t what it used to be”. Cardus awoke to see Larwood bowling to Hammond. Anyone who dozed off over recent years might have woken to see Warne bowling to Tendulkar. And tomorrow, some equally compelling contest is certain.

In the Commonwealth, cricket has always played a special role. The West Indian cricket writer, C.L.R. James argued that – for the West Indies – cricket had a magic that was a guiding light for the dispossessed and the disenfranchised.

I believe that to be true. Over many decades, cricket has, for some, been an escape from obscurity to fame, poverty to comfort, exclusion to inclusion.

Think of the great players who first picked up a bat and ball on the streets of Lahore or Kingston or Mumbai. But – more widely than its influence on individuals – cricket touches deep and conflicting emotions. One need only think of how an Ashes win lifts morale in England or Australia. Or a Series win

between India and Pakistan – or Australia and New Zealand – or ... well, I don't think I need go on.

Cricket can uplift whole communities – whole nations, even – *or* cast them down. It adds value to lives. The classic illustration was here at Lord's in 1950. That year, the West Indies took on England at her own game, in her own country, at the very headquarters of cricket.

And they beat her on merit. Perhaps no win in cricket ever had such social significance as Ramadhin and Valentine's destruction of England at Lord's. The game was won by the charm and guile of the cricketing sophisticates' delight: the art of great spin bowling. It was intelligent cricket – the West Indies *out-thought* England as well as *out-played* them. As a result, notwithstanding their tough lives, all West Indians walked a little taller.

The Commonwealth has infinite variety. Large nations. Small Nations. Old Nations. New Nations. Rich Nations. Poor Nations. They all take their place. And within them – cricket takes its place. And because cricket is a game of the mind, the way it is played reflects the very marrow of the nation from which the players come. Even putting aside physical characteristics, the professional cricket watcher would soon know whether he (or she) was watching Australia or Sri Lanka, West Indies or England, South Africa or India.

Many years ago that great cricketer, Prince Ranjitsingh, analysed a cricket crowd:

“There are all sorts and conditions of men around the ropes – bricklayers, bank clerks, soldiers, postmen and stockbrokers. And in the pavilion are QCs, artists, Archdeacons and leader writers. Bad men, good men, workers and idlers are all there and all at one in their keen-ness over the game ... cricket brings the most opposite characters and the most diverse lives together”.

He might have added that such sentiments apply to countries, too. Within the Commonwealth, cricket is an invisible bond, a

shared love that brings people together. Cricket is cohesive, not divisive.

I saw this for myself in the mid-1990s when I was invited to speak to the South African Parliament, during the first post-Apartheid visit of a British Prime Minister.

I took with me some famous sporting personalities and we visited Soweto, armed with sporting equipment for the young children there. Colin Cowdrey and Alec Stewart presided over the cricket nets. That wonderful athlete Judy Simpson held a masterclass in athletics. Bobby Charlton demonstrated his mastery of football.

In the nets, I bowled Steve Tshwete, the South African Sports Minister, first ball. It was – as I recall – the only positive headline I got that year. All Soweto turned out and the sports stars were mobbed. But cricket held sway – except for one small boy.

He had been coached on hurdling by Judy Simpson and told to practice *every single waking moment*. He was then coached on cricket by Colin Cowdrey. “I’ll practice day and night, Mr Cowdrey”, the boy promised. “Absolutely not!”, said a horrified Colin, “you must be sure to get plenty of sleep too”. Colin wasn’t called “Kipper Cowdrey” for nothing.

As the boy walked away shaking his head, I heard him mutter: “The cricket man says I’ve got to sleep. Cricket must be for sissies”. And he tossed down his cricket bat and began hurdling over it instead.

During those hours in Soweto there was an outpouring of sheer, exuberant joy amidst profound hardship. *Never* doubt the healing properties of sport.

The game of cricket today is a far cry from the age of humbug when W.G. Grace pocketed large fees for playing cricket, at the same time as he symbolised and promoted the concept of the Gentleman Amateur.

We have moved on from the age when, in England, the Captain, the Amateurs and the Professional players all used different dressing rooms and stepped onto the pitch through separate gates. Such images symbolise times long past. As does the Empire that is now a Commonwealth.

In an ever-shrinking, increasingly inter-dependent world, both the Commonwealth and cricket continue to grow. *Once* cricket was an English game. Now it belongs to many countries – even Afghanistan and China are adopting it with enthusiasm. When I saw the Prime Minister of Kuwait recently, he was telling me about the cricket pitch he has just designed at his country residence, hopeful that – by the time I next visit – it will be ready for play.

Cricket and the Commonwealth continue to march together. The intricacies of both are difficult to explain, but both continue to thrive. They are linked by history, and have evolved over time to reflect our shared interests, common goals, sense of fair play – and sense of fun.

In forty years' time – when the Commonwealth marks its Centenary Year – I hope and believe that cricket will still be playing its own unique role in strengthening and widening the Commonwealth we celebrate tonight.