

Conflict Resolution in the Commonwealth

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Mr Speaker, Chief Minister, Members of the Assembly, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour to be with you today, celebrating Commonwealth Day in Stormont for the first time since the new Northern Ireland Assembly was elected last year. That election was a historic moment for Northern Ireland after years of conflict and false starts. It gave a real sense of hope that the path to an enduring peace might at last have been found.

It was a moment welcomed not only here but in the wider Commonwealth, for it gave hope to others still struggling with unresolved conflict. It also gave hope of fresh relationships and new possibilities. I remember particularly the sense of excitement with which I was telephoned from Stormont a few months later by those wanting to tell me that a branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association had been re-established with cross party support.

So it was with particular pleasure that I received the invitation from the Speaker to be here today on Commonwealth Day. For today across the Commonwealth, whether it is with multi-faith services or receptions or Heads of Government messages, in London, Canberra, Kampala or New Delhi, we are all joining in one celebration of our unity and commitment to Commonwealth values.

Before I move to my subject today of Conflict Resolution in the Commonwealth, I must tell you of a family connection with this place which makes me doubly pleased to be here with my wife and daughter. One of the heroes of my family is my great uncle Rev Vivian Gregg-MacGregor who came from here. He served with the Anzacs at Gallipoli, in the Field Ambulance, and was decorated for bravery, before becoming a Chaplain on the Western Front. Always a man of peace in the midst of war, he later ministered in parishes in Australia and England.

His grandmother was Elizabeth Rose-Cleland of Rathgael House, now the location of your Education Department. Her Cleland cousins owned Stormont Castle and this estate. So it is with a sense of familiarity and homecoming I make my first visit here – not least because we have kept the name Rathgael alive in Australia, in a much humbler house now lived in by an uncle. Sadly the beautiful Rathgael House of earlier days is long since demolished, but you have built a grander and nobler Stormont in this place.

Perhaps this family story of houses and change can be seen as a metaphor for the changes and challenges we face in nation building in our wider family of Commonwealth states and entities. Conflict is sadly no stranger to Commonwealth nations, and working through political conflict to find common solutions is a constant part of the work of our Secretary-General and the Political Division I head.

A former British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, once spoke of spending much of his time on cleaning up messes left by the British Empire. I understand what he means as we work through issues in Nigeria, Pakistan, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Swaziland, Sierra Leone or Fiji. For whatever good or ill it did, much was left undone or in flux at the end of Empire.

The Commonwealth is today a free association of 53 sovereign nations bound together by ties of history, language, education, parliamentary governance and the rule of law. The Secretariat thus has a particular mission to work with member nations as a trusted partner to assist in their achievement of democracy and development. And often this means addressing conflict and the potential for conflict.

It also faces new challenges from the forces of extremism and terror that have gripped the world since the cataclysmic destruction of the World Trade Centre by Al Qaeda on 9/11. Many, including Commonwealth leaders, have condemned such events and taken action in response. But fewer have tried to grapple with the unanswered questions of why such events occur. The Commonwealth however has not shied away from this difficult task.

Last year we produced for our Heads of Government a report entitled “Civil Paths to Peace”, the Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding chaired by Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen. Your own former Speaker, Lord John Alderdice, was a prominent and influential member of this Commission.

As we explored the nature and nurture of violence; and issues of poverty, inequality and humiliation; of history, grievance and conflict: as well as how to build respect and understanding in society and cooperation between societies; the experience of Ireland often came up. I particularly recall an insight from Lord Alderdice that I found especially helpful – what we are seeking to do is not necessarily to agree with each other, but rather to find ways of disagreeing without killing each other. That is respect and understanding at it’s starkest.

Another major insight of this report is the importance of understanding that we all have many identities – and are not simply divided along the lines of our religion, or tribe, or nation, or class, or whatever is the perceived identity of the moment. It is an issue that has been much written about Professor Sen, an Indian based in Cambridge and teaching at Harvard, in his book ‘Identity and Violence – the Illusion of Destiny’. It is a theme addressed by another Commission member Kwame Anthony Appiah, the Ghanaian grandson of Stafford Cripps now teaching at Princeton, in his book “Cosmopolitanism – Ethics in a World of Strangers”. This sense of our common humanity across races, religions and nations is at the core of our fundamental Commonwealth values and our approach to conflict resolution. It is an approach that worked for us in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and it is an approach that inspires us in the challenges we face today.

At this moment, it most challenges us when grappling with the outbreak of tribal conflict in Kenya following the recent elections. Kenya, a key country in Africa, has a complex political history. Some recall the Mau Mau violent conflict of the 1950s, which was followed by a period of peace and stability in the early days of independence of the 1960s. But as a one party state in the 1970s and 1980s it became increasingly repressive and certain tribes tended to dominate its politics and economics.

In 2002 there was a very exciting election in which the old leadership was swept aside by a new political force which brought together all the major tribal groups and emerging leaders. Sadly they fell out among themselves and failed to address some of the major issues of corruption and power sharing that they had promised. The elections at the end of last year saw the old tribal and economic divisions come to the fore in campaigning, with disastrous results when the counting process and results proved controversial.

The Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group, Tejan Kabbah, former President of Sierra Leone, immediately moved from observing the elections to addressing the resulting conflict, meeting with all the political leaders to begin a dialogue process. He handed the baton on to the then African Union Chair, President Kuffour of Ghana, and we went out with a Commonwealth team. Talks broke down but it was agreed the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was the right man to bring in. He has shown great persistence and skill in bringing the parties to an agreement. But much remains to be done to see its implementation. The Commonwealth is now working on this with other partners.

Two other major issues on which we are engaged are Pakistan and Fiji. Unfortunately both had to be suspended from Commonwealth councils for breaches of our fundamental values, both flowing from military interventions in civilian political government. There is progress now in both countries, progress for which we have worked hard. We look forward soon to being able to engage with a new elected civilian government in Pakistan, following good elections there, despite the terrible tragedy of Benazir Bhutto's assassination. In Fiji the Secretary-General's Special Representative Sir Paul

Reeves is promoting a dialogue process between the parties with a view to elections early next year.

These are some of the more high profile issues in the Commonwealth at the moment and they are works in progress. But we are also active in trying to ensure where we can that other areas of political tension do not become headline issues. In recent years we have assisted Swaziland with developing a constitution to take it from the rule of absolute monarchy to a constitutional democratic system more acceptable in the modern world and to the expectation of Swazis. In Maldives we have assisted with advice on a major reform process which has already brought greater political liberalization. A new Constitution is being finalized and multi-party elections are expected by the end of the year. Similar work continues in Guyana, Cameroon and Tonga, to name a few.

We call this work the Secretary-General's "good offices" – our word covering the Commonwealth's activity both in conflict resolution and in conflict prevention. Unlike the United Nations, which primarily engages on conflicts between nation states, our work is within the state, between parties competing for the political space.

This work is normally led by a Secretary-General's Special Envoy, who is always an eminent Commonwealth citizen, often a former Minister or Head of State. This ensures access at the highest level, where their own experience can resonate with present day leaders. They are supported by experienced professional staff from the Political Affairs Division, often from the same region. They understand well the political issues and cultural sensitivities which need to be addressed.

We always work on the basis of invitation, rather than intervention, and insist on speaking to all parties. Our approach to resolving conflict focuses on engaging and supporting, often with technical expertise, institutions like Parliament, the Judiciary and independent Human Rights and Electoral Commissions which are essential to buttressing sustainable solutions in member countries. We work closely with Commonwealth organizations, like the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum as well as civil society groups to carry our work forward.

Finally we rely on the peer pressure of other Commonwealth nations and leaders, reinforced by our bi-annual Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, to achieve final success.

Does any of this work and have lasting value? My answer is a resounding yes. Before coming to the Commonwealth, I was Australian High Commissioner in Nigeria and accredited also to Sierra Leone. In the late 1990s Sierra Leone was a dangerous place, with violent rebels corrupted by illegal diamond smuggling terrorizing the population, chopping of their hands and arms. The Commonwealth stood firm by President Kabbah's government even when he had to flee. Commonwealth countries – notably the UK, Nigeria, India and Kenya – provided peacekeeping forces which allowed a return to stability and the rule of the law.

The Commonwealth and Commonwealth countries then came in with a wide range of support. One program which stands out for me was for the rehabilitation of the child soldiers I had once seen terrorizing the populace, teaching them to build houses and reconstruct their country. A Special Court was set up to try war criminals, and even managed to indict and seize Charles Taylor, the former President of Liberia, who had helped arm and fund the rebels. (Ironically for us here the Chief Prosecutor of the Court was Sir Desmond de Silva a relative of mine and a Sri Lankan descendant of the Rose-Cleland family). Just last year Sierra Leone held elections in which the government changed hands – peacefully. It has come a long way with Commonwealth help.

The Commonwealth work on conflict resolution never ends. Our world is still too unstable to expect that in the short term. You know that well here in Northern Ireland. Even when progress is made there are still issues to be worked through. Centuries of conflict and division cannot be ended in a matter of days. It is in the hearts and minds of men and women that wars are won, and where conflict must finally be brought to an end.

Our approach to conflict resolution is above all rooted in our values – of democracy, equality, rule of law, representative government and freedom of expression. There are members we have lost who could not live up to these values – like Zimbabwe. We miss Zimbabwe and

hope one day changed conditions will see it rejoin us. There are members we never had – like Burma – who still suffer under tyranny and who we care about. As a values based organization, we are open to new members who were never part of the Empire. Commonwealth membership has allowed Mozambique to consolidate successfully its post-conflict democracy. Rwanda is now actively seeking membership.

We in the Commonwealth know our work, like our organization, is there for the long term, a force for democracy, for development and for peace. New challenges – like the environment, the theme of this year's Commonwealth Day – face us. But working together we will find common solutions. It is so good to have your Assembly again as part of our Commonwealth parliamentary network, and your members as part of our family, joining us in finding those solutions. Thank you.