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International Parliamentary Conference on Peace-building: Tackling state
fragility (31 January to 6 February 2010)
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Closing Keynote: The Commonwealth, International Parliamentary Diplomacy and Building Peace

How has the Commonwealth at its 60th anniversary facilitated inclusive and multilayered international diplomacy and supported transitions from violent conflict to peace? What lessons have been learned? How can the Commonwealth contribute over the next 60 years and what role can parliamentarians play in international diplomacy for sustainable development, peace and security?

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Welcome

Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, "... A Parliament is that to the Commonwealth which the soul is to the body. It behoves us therefore to keep the facility of that soul from distemper."

I am quoting the great John Pym, a passionate Parliamentarian in a rather different Commonwealth.

He shone in a turbulent period in English history: a time of civil war, and the so-called 'Long Parliament'.

He wrote those words in the late 1640s, but it is my task in this final session to try and nourish your souls and keep them from distemper now, in 2010.

Much of that nourishment has, I understand, already been given to you in a week of very good conferencing, split between London and Belfast, with a Communique and related determination to match.

We applaud Andrew Tuggey and the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association: your contribution in the convening and strengthening of Commonwealth parliamentarians is second to none, and we very much appreciate your work.

And I greet all of you who have travelled to be with us – from Commonwealth countries and non-Commonwealth countries alike.

I understand that some 25 Commonwealth countries are represented here today, and 10 from outside our number.

As globalists in a globalising world, we in the Commonwealth welcome you all: our challenges and solutions are collective; our humanity is shared; the future is for all.

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Northern Ireland

In particular today, I take this opportunity to salute the people and the parliamentarians of Northern Ireland, on a historic and happy day for this province.

The people of this Assembly must remain both resolute and accommodating in achieving their highest goals and their highest standards. Northern Ireland, like the 54-nation Commonwealth, journeys, sometimes haltingly, towards its own destination and its own destiny. Through sheer force of will, it has already come so far in securing a commitment to pluralism and to peace.

I believe I speak for all in the Commonwealth when I convey my sincere good wishes to Speaker Hay, First Minister Robinson, Deputy First Minister McGuinness, and the other 106 members of the Northern Ireland Assembly – four times suspended, perhaps, but I hope four times more determined to bring benefit to the people of this province.

It is so obvious that we can almost forget to say it: there can be no better example to this CPA conference than this very Assembly, to demonstrate how important Parliament is to the transformation of conflict.

So I believe I can say that today is yet another ‘good’ Friday in the province of Northern Ireland.

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‘Peace-building’ & ‘fragility’: a slight reinterpretation

It is my task this afternoon to close this conference. I am asked to reflect on how the Commonwealth has itself built peace and tackled state fragility, and how it can continue to do so. And we are *all* asked, as a group, to go away from this event having reflected on the role that parliamentarians can play in these vital tasks.

I start with a caveat: I shall indeed address these chosen topics, but I shall reinterpret them somewhat, and broaden their scope. ‘Peace’ is more than the absence of conflict; and we will see that there are multiple layers of ‘fragility’.

So all nations are journeying, and solidarity in that journey is part of the healing, collective touch of a family of nations such as the Commonwealth. We are home to countries rich and poor, large and small, new and old, and to humankind in all its diversity. We are a Commonwealth of values, and a Commonwealth focussed in the service of its most vulnerable people.

But let me first address peace and fragility in the more traditional manner.

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Fragile states – outside and inside the Commonwealth

State fragility, as no doubt you have discussed this week, is relative. The whole concept has gradations: and we thereby use the adjectives ‘fragile’, ‘failing’ and ‘failed’.

But all, to a greater or lesser degree, answer to the description of being countries in which governments cannot, or will not, deliver their most basic functions to the majority of their people.

The headline fact is that there are over 50 fragile, failing or failed states in the world – fully one quarter of the world's states – which are also home to one-seventh of the world's population, and one-third of its poverty.

To understand state fragility, one has to travel beyond definitions and quantitative indices.

Our fragility is defined by the challenges we are yet to overcome; just as our strength is defined by the challenges we have overcome.

Meanwhile, there are competing reasons as to why our attainment of the Millennium Development Goals is in danger.

We hear of a lack of developing country responsibility and capacity; a lack of developed country responsibility and support; an unchecked growth in population.

But as big a reason as any is these fragile and failing states.

These are 'home', if such a word can be used, to disproportionate numbers of those living in poverty, those children out of primary school, those mothers dying in childbirth and children dying under the age of five, those with HIV, or malaria, or without access to sanitation.

Further still, we know that fragility is contagious: it is no respecter of borders. It is a threat to both regional and global security.

So this is why these states matter so much.

They cost time and money.

We hear many figures: Joseph Stiglitz tells us that the turmoil in Iraq will cost the world \$6 trillion; Paul Collier computes a minimum figure of \$50 billion in direct and indirect costs for any civil war, in any country.

Whichever: the point is well made.

It is reckoned that £1 spent in conflict prevention saves £4 spent in conflict resolution.

Beyond 'mere' time and money, there is the moral case, about the fulfilment of the human community.

There is the argument that fragile states will provide the key to our success as a global community.

None can afford to turn their backs on them.

In a conference on peace-building, I need to state the obvious fact that the Commonwealth has known – and still knows – its share of violence.

The 2008 World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessment tables list the 69 countries receiving International Development Association support, of which 28 are in the Commonwealth.

Within the 69, nine Commonwealth countries are amongst those seen to be at the highest level of risk.

The briefest scan of our Commonwealth history is testimony to our own challenges.

And lest we forget, most of our members are young in years, and the roots of their democratic cultures and institutions are not strong.

Decolonisation in the 1950s and 60s was not without violent struggle.

The first Secretary-General, Arnold Smith, was thrown headlong into crises in Nigeria and Uganda in the 60s and 70s.

In the 70s and 80s, the Commonwealth fought tenaciously against any form of state-sanctioned racism and violence wherever it found it, and particularly in southern Africa and southern Asia.

In more recent decades, the Commonwealth has seen more than its fair share of military coups, flawed elections and electoral violence, simmering tensions, and civil war.

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The Commonwealth response 1: protecting & promoting values

Instead, the Commonwealth's response has revolved around the constancy of its values, coupled with the dexterity of the way it uses its highly prized access and trusted partner status, in order to protect those values.

Ours is the force of argument, rather than the argument of force.

This is because the Commonwealth's democratic values are its firm foundation: they transcend the bonds of shared history, language, institutions, and even of collective challenges.

They are the rock upon which this house is built, and they have been set down in successive documents from the early 1970s onwards.

In the association's 60th anniversary last year, we brought them all under one roof when our Heads of Government met in Port of Spain.

The result was a defining document which I thoroughly recommend to you: it is called the Affirmation on Commonwealth Values and Principles.

Its predecessor was the Harare Principles of 1991, famously quoted by President F W De Klerk in 1992 as being his ideal of the guiding principles of the new South Africa.

Those values are sacrosanct, and when they are seriously or repeatedly violated, and when peace itself is under threat, we have a mechanism for reacting, based on the peer review of a committee of nine rotating Foreign Ministers.

That is the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group – or CMAG – which was established in 1995.

One of its very first actions was to suspend Nigeria in the wake of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and others in Ogoniland.

Such adherence to Commonwealth values constitutes a clear commitment to peace.

There can be no doubt in our minds that we will always work positively with a country which is subject to decisions of CMAG, helping it to address its challenges and to restore democracy.

While Fiji remains suspended, and while Zimbabwe took itself out of the organisation, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Pakistan, The Gambia and the Solomon Islands have all come off the CMAG agenda, after sustained efforts by the inter-governmental Commonwealth to help them do so.

This includes addressing some of the root causes of the instability that led to the suspension.

After restoration to the Commonwealth, some of the democratic governments have even thanked the association for suspending the unconstitutional regimes.

You will note that these cases all relate to the constitutionality of government. They do not encompass conflicts between states, and nor do they encompass some of the very serious grievances – especially over human rights – which can happen within states, and within constitutionally elected governments.

There are many who call for the Commonwealth to be more actively engaged in such situations.

Our new Commonwealth 'Affirmation' includes a clause asking and enabling us to be just that, by redefining what we mean by serious or persistent violation of our values and principles.

We are therefore examining how to strengthen the hand of CMAG, and raising the bar in the Commonwealth on adherence to our values.

This, then, is the first element of Commonwealth work to address fragility: it is the primacy of our values – and not just of defending them, but of practically strengthening the way in which they are respected and applied.

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The Commonwealth response 2: 'Good Offices'

The second element – linked, yet quite deliberately distinct – is what is called the Secretary-General's Good Offices.

You will have heard about them earlier in the week, from my colleague Nita Yawanarajah.

'Good Offices' is good political news which doesn't always make for good media news: it is the behind-the-scenes Commonwealth diplomacy that seeks to avert conflict – and at the same time advances dialogue and longer-term reform, reconstruction and reconciliation.

There have been no hard and fast rules as to where Good Offices should apply, other than that they should be instigated by invitation, and not by interference.

This may explain why we have not competed with the peace-keeping work of other international partners in some of our member countries.

The essence of the work is in opening doors, removing bottlenecks and bringing about political dialogue.

And the earlier the engagement, the better: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of conflict resolution and recovery.

The Good Offices work itself has tended to focus on two broad areas: new or revised Constitutions in countries like Fiji, Swaziland, Kenya, The Maldives

and Tonga; and new or revised parliamentary and electoral systems in places like Lesotho, Zanzibar, Cameroon, The Gambia, Guyana. All of these countries have experienced high political and social tension, and some have been places of varying degrees of violence.

The first type of work creates the framework for establishing or strengthening democracy; the second builds up the institutions which can best sustain it. Underlying both streams of activity is the aim to ensure that people have a sense of pride in, and ownership of, the institutions that govern them.

In general, my predecessors and I have chosen as Special Envoys people with experience in senior political roles: former ministers and Heads of Government, for instance, who can engage with real empathy and at the highest levels.

My current envoy in Fiji, for instance, is Sir Paul Reeves, a former Governor General and Archbishop of New Zealand.

Further diplomatic weight can be applied beyond the Envoys themselves, including the Commonwealth Chairperson-in-Office.

In 2006, President Obasanjo of Nigeria visited The Gambia in support of the Commonwealth's engagement there, persuading the political parties to sign a Memorandum of Understanding – drawn up by our Envoy General Abubakar – to govern the conduct of the 2006 Presidential Election.

Good Offices work is an intuitive process of ebb and flow, to and fro, building delicate relationships and rebuilding bruised ones.

A key to our Good Offices work is time: time to build relationships; and time to help rebuild or create strong democratic institutions.

A quick fix is rarely – if ever – possible.

Hurried solutions to longstanding tensions rarely last, and the aftermath of failed agreements can be harder to overcome than the original problem.

What is more, objectives can change and evolve.

No two Commonwealth mediations are the same, but all will exhibit the four qualities of inclusiveness, impartiality, local ownership and international partnership.

'Inclusiveness' means that the Envoy will seek to be in direct contact with all of the leading groups in society, and not just people like yourselves in Parliament.

He or she will consult with such as church groups, political actors and civil society networks, human rights activists, media and women's groups – all in the cause of gaining widespread support for the task in hand.

'Impartiality' means that the Envoy must give equal time to Government and Opposition within Parliament, which is not always easy when (as an inter-governmental organisation), the Commonwealth is often presumed to be working in tandem with the Government.

'Local ownership' means that the commitment to reach a solution must be spearheaded by the Government, and most obviously by the Head of that Government.

Our Good Offices work has been at its strongest where it supports an ongoing programme of domestic reform to which a Government is fully committed.

'International partnership' means that the Commonwealth's Good Offices are given extra weight by being shared with others in the international community. Our work in Guyana, for example, involved the UN, the OAS and CARICOM; in the Maldives, the EU was incorporated; and in Fiji, the UN and the Pacific Islands Forum.

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**The Commonwealth response 3:
'Good Offices *plus*' – democratic institution-building
.... and other programmes, especially 'Respect & Understanding'**

Almost all of the Good Offices work is supplemented by longer-term programmes of technical assistance designed to support reform initiatives and to strengthen democratic institutions.

So the quicker and less-defined work of the Envoy is frequently complemented by the slower and carefully structured assistance projects carried out by Commonwealth technical experts.

Take the one example of Cameroon, where human rights training has been given to police and prison officers; an adviser has brought women's concerns into government planning; an IT expert has developed solutions to computerize judicial reforms; while the Commonwealth has also been instrumental in the conception and planning of the new Independent Election Commission.

Rarely can Commonwealth Good Offices be measured specifically for what they are.

More likely, they can be measured for what they are part of.

But the results of peacebuilding in action are remarkable, and constitute far more than an absence of conflict or tension.

Our work in Lesotho, for instance, saw Government and Opposition brought to agreement over a series of reforms to the electoral and parliamentary system.

Perhaps the best recent example of Commonwealth Good Offices work can be seen in a country like The Maldives, which President Nasheed himself has claimed to be a Commonwealth success story.

Consider what happened in that country at the end of 2008, when a one-party state of over 30 years' standing negotiated and introduced a new constitution, and then conducted its second ever multi-party elections.

In these, it saw power change hands – and smoothly.

All this, with Commonwealth help and advice behind the scenes, and assistance in building institutions.

Commonwealth peace-building work can be seen in almost every aspect of work.

Our gender equality programme, our youth programme, our media training programme: all develop policy – and practical projects – on building peace.

And I referred earlier to another Commonwealth contribution to peace-building, in the Commission on Respect and Understanding which the Northern Irishman Lord Alderdice served with such distinction.

That Commission – deriving from a mandate given to us by Heads of Government in the wake of 9/11 and other instances of the deep fractures in our societies – led to a report, *Civil Paths to Peace*, copies of which I have brought with me today.

Much has come of it.

One result was a dossier of the practical – local, and often quite basic – ways in which different Commonwealth countries have approached different causes of tension.

A current initiative is a teachers' resource pack on how to present schoolchildren with teaching on terrorism.

Meanwhile a network of seven Commonwealth universities is linked by the Commonwealth of Learning, in sharing best peace-building practice, including a module on student community service.

We have also developed citizenship courses which were first taken up in India and then translated and used in Cyprus.

I trust I have been able to shed some light on Commonwealth ideas of peacebuilding and fragile states.

All countries have elements of fragility, and the greatest secret to long-term stability is in building the local ownership and culture of democracy, and the institutions which support it.

That is why our work in supporting such bodies as election commissions, human rights commissions, ombudsmen, youth councils, media regulatory bodies – and, of course, parliamentarians – is so very important.

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**The Commonwealth response 4: 'Good Offices *plus*' ...
democratic institution-building – the role of Parliament itself**

If ownership and implementation of peace-building belongs anywhere, it belongs with you, and with the thousands of other Commonwealth parliamentarians.

We in the Commonwealth Secretariat, and especially our cousins in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, believe passionately in you as agents not of fragility, but of stability.

We extol the virtues and the role of the legislature, as one of three strictly independent pillars of government (alongside the judiciary and the executive). Parliaments are the very expression of national sovereignty and unity; the conscience of the people, and the protector of their rights, their freedoms and their aspirations.

As parliamentarians, we look to you as partners, and as those with responsibility: for being jealous guardians of democratic principles and values; for protecting the interests of minorities or disenfranchised groups; for advancing the role of women and youth; for providing a legitimate venue for people to air their grievances; for channelling debate until it reaches

consensus; and for being the mechanism through which the people can ensure the proper workings of government.
Yours is indeed a sacred role: 'the soul to the body', as John Pym said.

And yet, as Pym well knew, there are mysteries of the soul that are never unlocked.

Parliaments have a role in resolving conflict, and in calling to account Government plans to do so.

This very Northern Ireland Assembly embodies that promise.

Yet some Parliaments have been helpless bystanders in situations of conflict, while others have been complicit in perpetuating them: reflecting the ills of their societies, and compounding them.

This is why so many of our loosely-defined 'peacebuilding' energies – and, of course, even more of those in the CPA – go towards the simplest of actions which transcend some of these muddy waters.

We have been champions, for instance, of standing orders and cross-party committees – which, alongside our 'Government and Opposition' workshops – strengthen the concept that an opposition is an integral and creative part of a functioning democracy, and not a force that can be sidelined, and emasculated.

It is why we have encouraged public accounts committees.

It is why we have supported Parliament in all of its core functions, of representation, law-making and oversight.

Many of the bodies which report to you – audit institutions, ombudsmen, anti-corruption agencies – are supported by us.

And the joy of an international network is that we can share best practice, and indeed bring people together.

The CPA is our largest Commonwealth body, with some 16,000 members.

And surely it is a comfort for the Parliamentarians of one country to know that their fellow democrats and Parliamentarians in another country are discussing their concerns, and the concerns of the people they represent?

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Another kind of fragility: economic fragility, and the links between democracy and development

So parliaments are a crucial element of stability and of democracy.

But that Democracy has a twin, and both of these twins are our concerns.

The twin is Development.

The two are intertwined, and organically linked: we can safely say that where democracy flourishes, so does development.

This was the overarching finding of one of the seminal pieces of research of this 21st Century to date, carried out by a Commonwealth Commission headed by Manmohan Singh, then Finance Minister – and now Prime Minister – of India.

That is why we urge that the issue of state fragility be looked at in terms of economic as well as political fragility.

16 of our Commonwealth members are officially Least Developed Countries; 32 are small states with populations of less than 1.5 million; 28 are island states.

So many of them are inherently vulnerable.

They may be beholden to their bigger and more powerful neighbours, to the big and powerful forces of the environment, to trade rules in which they had little part, or to those who supply them with aid.

They are beholden, too, to their own limitations – with limited goods and services, and limited capacity.

Our economic work is, of course, a topic of its own, to which I cannot do justice here, other than to say that it is as important to our membership – and to state fragility – as is our work to strengthen the institutions of the state and of democracy.

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To end: Rwanda

Let me end with one brand new Commonwealth example of a state that was 'failed' and is now merely 'fragile'; of a state which was at war and which is now at peace.

I refer to the Commonwealth's newest member, admitted by Heads of Government in November 2009: Rwanda.

All in this room know only too well what dreadful and chilling things happened in that country in 1994.

Rwandans themselves, of course, still bear the deepest scars.

Yet Rwanda today is a country on the move.

The Commonwealth can take no credit for its extraordinary transformation, other than that, perhaps, the prospect of membership of this association provided something of a spur towards international acceptance.

Two weeks ago, I addressed the two Houses of Rwanda's Parliament in Kigali.

I found it a very moving occasion.

I praised 'The Land of a Thousand Hills', as it is known, for the many hills it has itself climbed – slowly, surely, and ever higher.

While acknowledging some of the deficits in the new state, I was able to praise it for a newly adopted Constitution based on power-sharing and consensus, and for a clear commitment to multi-party democracy.

We found practical commitment to match: in ensuring the representation of women, young people and independent voices and thoughts in its Parliament, and in the representation of opposition political parties in positions that count.

We found a judiciary that is constitutionally independent, combining civil, customary and common law.

We found the institutional structures and policy commitments of accountable administration and good governance, and of human rights.

And we saw evidence of the theory that democracy breeds development, with a steady and remarkable rise in national output.

Rwanda, I said then, fully deserves the recognition it has been given.

For all the help which others have given it – not least this country, the United Kingdom – Rwanda's success in building peace and prosperity is its own, with its 'six-point plan' and its 'vision 2020'.

That process has come from within: it is a considerable achievement.
Yet all acknowledge that there is so much further to go.
The culture of democracy runs deeper than the form of democracy.
Deep wounds remain, but so does the will to bring justice, and - with it - truth and reconciliation.

The decision of Heads of Government to accept Rwanda was both a response to goodwill, and an act of goodwill.
It was a statement of affirmation, and the expression of a desire to engage, and be a partner.
Because each Commonwealth country is climbing hills; each is journeying on the often rugged and winding paths of democracy, development and diversity; each has known reversal, but remains committed to advance.
This is the experience of all our member countries: the oldest democracies and the newest; the most developed and the least.
In committing to support Rwanda reach its goals, they were, in effect, also recommitting to reach their own, and to do so collectively – across regions, across continents, across the entire globe.

Distinguished parliamentarians, I hope you will share my view that fragility is relative.
Yet tackling fragility is more absolute – it is an exercise built on values, on institutions, and on the home-grown will of nations and peoples to pull themselves out of the mire, and to walk free.
Rwanda has shown us that.
I wish you all courage and strength as you seek to do the same. Those whom you represent ... depend on you.

ENDS