

Binding values

By **HE RT HON DON MCKINNON**

COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY-GENERAL



DON MCKINNON

was educated at Nelson College, New Zealand, Woodrow Wilson High School (Washington DC) and Lincoln University, New Zealand. He was elected Commonwealth Secretary-General at the November 1999 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Durban, South Africa. He assumed office on 1st April 2000. Prior to his appointment he was New Zealand's longest-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, having been elected to Parliament in 1978. He was also Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the House of Representatives.

The Commonwealth descends on Uganda in the second half of November 2007.

'CHOGM' is the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting – and much more. It is, in fact, five events rolled into one: a Heads of Government Meeting; a Foreign Ministers' Meeting; a Commonwealth Business Forum; a Commonwealth Peoples' Forum for NGOs and civil society organisations; and a Commonwealth Youth Forum. It adds up to 4,000 delegates, 1,000 press, and more still in the form of an extraordinary fusion of peoples, ideas, promises reviewed and promises made. It is a melee of activity, formal and informal discussion, bonding and networking. It is living testimony to the ties of language, history, culture and institutions that bind us, and to the magic of a family of 53 nations sitting at the same table. Some of the family are as close to each other as brothers and sisters; while others feel more like distant cousins. But all are bound by the same values and concerns.

What are those values and concerns, and how does CHOGM address them? Here are just four of the questions that will be asked and answered in Kampala.

Question 1: where does the Commonwealth stand as an organisation of democratic values, set down so publicly at previous Meetings, above all in 1971 and

1991? Are we true to our claims about the primacy of free and fair elections, of good governance, strong, efficient and accountable institutions, and the other elements of a real democratic culture in the form of free and responsible media, a lively civil society, and communities that value and include women and girls as much as men and boys, children and youth as much as adults, human rights, and different religious, linguistic or ethnic communities?

CHOGM and the events around it will address those questions in many ways – with separate events, even, for separate topics. The Youth Forum alone will bring together some 200 young people from around the Commonwealth, in passionate debate and angling towards a clear set of recommendations to be presented to Heads of Government.

But the obvious way that we will look at the question of values is by asking where our members are struggling in the face of those values, and how we can help them to achieve the standards that we have collectively set for ourselves. And standards are important, because it is our commitment to higher standards than are set in other international organisations that stands us out in the crowd, and leads to the queue of prospective new members.

The Commonwealth is seeking a clear set of recommendations from its Youth Forum



The acid test of our commitment to our democratic values is how we deal with those who flout them

Two countries are currently on the agenda of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG): these are Fiji and Pakistan. Fiji was suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth in the wake of the military overthrow of a civilian government in December 2006; while Pakistan has been on the agenda longer, with CMAG and all our Heads of Government together expecting General Musharraf to relinquish one of the roles of Army Chief of Staff and President by the end of the presidential term in 2007. The acid test of our commitment to our democratic values is how we deal with those who flout them, and CMAG and CHOGM will therefore keep these countries high on the agenda. Yet the Commonwealth way is never to isolate members: its task is to work with them all, to uphold our shared values and principles. Hence the dialogue with the interim government in Fiji to restore democratic government, and the longer-running dialogue with Pakistan.

Beyond Fiji and Pakistan, the world will also ask questions of us about other member states with their own democratic challenges. Particular attention will be paid to the countries in which we use quiet diplomacy in the form of my Special Envoys and their 'Good Offices'. These are currently underway – often looking at the tensions and challenges of bringing in new or revised Constitutions or parliamentary/electoral systems, and strengthening democratic culture and institutions – in places like Swaziland, Kenya, Maldives, Tonga, Lesotho, Zanzibar, Cameroon, The Gambia, and Guyana.

The queue of potential new members, too, also gives clues as to the strength of 'the organisation of democratic values'. The Modern Commonwealth,

born in 1949, has come a long way from its British antecedence, with Cameroon and Mozambique its most recent members, eight French-speaking members and five former German colonies.

A special Commonwealth Committee chaired by former Jamaican Prime Minister PJ Patterson will report to CHOGM Kampala, both on re-affirming the democratic values for would-be members (measurable in the strength of their democratic institutions and the extent of their commitment to internationally agreed principles), and also the democratic processes they will have to follow to become Commonwealth members. Several countries have expressed interest, and CHOGM will decide how we are to consider applications in the future. The Commonwealth has always been a dynamic and evolving institution in a dynamic and evolving world, growing from 8 in 1949 to 53 now – and counting.

Question 2: how can the Commonwealth respond to the potential disaster of one of the global challenges of our times – climate change?

Climate change is real enough in the Commonwealth. We have seen its effects writ large: like shrinking rainforests, exacerbated by unsustainable logging practices, in Asia and the Pacific; like a thawing of the tundra in northern Canada; the encroaching desert in northern Nigeria; the flooded lowlands in Bangladesh and the islands of the Maldives, Kiribati and Tuvalu. The Commonwealth first published a study on the subject in the late '80s. It was at a CHOGM in the same period that the president of The Maldives first told the world that his islands were, literally, going underwater. In February this year, Commonwealth ►

The implications of climate change are a priority issue for Commonwealth countries



COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING

◀ Environment Ministers met in Nairobi to agree a new Commonwealth-wide strategy to fight climate change, making best use of our extensive networks – as much of Ministries and parliamentarians as of groups like geographers, foresters, statisticians, meteorologists – to share best practice and awareness. Commonwealth Finance Ministers, meeting in Guyana in October, proclaimed the need to bring climate considerations into every aspect of government policy, and they also critically examined the economics and the financial implications of climate change.

At CHOGM, the world will look to us to pronounce very clearly on climate change, in the run up to the UN conference on the subject in Bali in December.

Why? Because a clarion call from a quarter of the world's states is heard and makes a difference. At the last CHOGM in Malta in 2005, it was our combined voice on the eve of the WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong – calling on richer countries to give more than they receive in the Doha Round – which led to some of the gains made there, especially in the lowering of agricultural tariffs and subsidies in areas like cotton, bananas and sugar.

Question 3: what can the Commonwealth offer the world to help it understand and heal the many wounds within its societies? What can the family of 53 nations – large and small, rich and poor, of every colour and creed, and the very essence of diversity – learn from itself, and how can it help others to learn?

In the wake of continuing terrorist tragedies in the developed and the developing worlds, the Malta CHOGM decided that it wanted the Commonwealth to bring its own experiences of diversity to bear, and to advise on how to build communities, transcending ethnic, religious, linguistic – even material, sexual and geographical – divides. In Kampala, a Commonwealth Commission chaired by Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen will present to Heads its new report, *Civil Paths to Peace*, which addresses this daunting subject. The report seeks to help us understand tensions before we try to resolve them. It calls on us to look beyond mere faith, at the dynamics of all communities, and at ourselves as individuals with many different identities.

Commonwealth reports should not and do not gather dust. Just as, for instance, the Commonwealth's 2003 report on the organic links between Democracy and Development became a definitive treatment on the two pillars of all Commonwealth activity, so too, I believe, will *Civil Paths to Peace* make similar waves in 2007. I want each of the Heads of Government to return home with their practical responses to the Report at the top of their priorities.

Question 4: how does the Commonwealth respond to the question set it by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, as the theme for CHOGM 2007? Just how,

Museveni asks us, do we 'transform societies to achieve political, economic and human development'? Why are a quarter of our Commonwealth members in the bottom quartile of the UN's Human Development Index, and a further third of them below the median? President Museveni's question is perhaps asked with some understandable frustration: why do these untenable and glaring gaps persist?

Again, the Commonwealth and the world will look to CHOGM for answers. Some will offer empirical economic theory, in the sure knowledge that nothing transforms and inspires and unleashes potential like economic growth, and above all domestic, regional and international trade. Yet the Commonwealth vision goes wider and deeper, and is based on the simple premise that a truly transformed society is one which is understood and supported by all of its citizens, and which benefits them all individually and collectively.

I will continue to argue that the UN's Millennium Development Goals – perhaps the most universally agreed aspirations for transformation – are as much about democracy as they are about development. Fighting poverty, ensuring primary education and gender equality in schools, reducing child and maternal mortality, turning back diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, stewarding the environment: all these Goals are about realising peoples' potential, and particularly poor peoples' potential.

These are just four of the Questions and Answers for the Commonwealth, CHOGM and for the world, of which its population comprises a third. If the Commonwealth is truly an alliance of governments and peoples, built around the twin pillars of democracy and development, it has to show that it means business in answering them. **F**

A truly transformed society is one which is understood and supported by all of its citizens

President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda, the CHOGM 2007 host nation, with the current Commonwealth Secretary-General HE Rt Hon Don McKinnon

