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Message from  
Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP  
Prime Minister  
of the United Kingdom

When the modern Commonwealth was born, the defining feature of international relations was the end of Empire and the emergence of a post-colonial age.

Countries were for the first time embracing independence and the world was breaking down into a collection of individual nations.

Sixty years on, we are bound together more closely than ever before by trade and business links, travel opportunities and high-speed communications.

The old colonial ties and colonial rivalries have been replaced by globalisation – and some rightly now ask how the Commonwealth fits in with this new era.

It is true that the enormous issues we face – on climate change, international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, poverty and securing economic prosperity – mean states are powerless to act alone.

But too often, tackling these cross-border challenges is left to unrepresentative international institutions which for many lack credibility and accountability.

The Commonwealth is different. Some 800 million Hindus, 500 million Muslims and 400 million Christians are represented.

Among our 53 Member States are some of the world's richest and some of the world's poorest; some of the most powerful and some of the most vulnerable.

But the strength and clarity of our shared

values gives us a unique legitimacy and the ability to tackle the tough global challenges that confront us.

Despite our differences, each and every one of us is committed to freedom and democracy; to the eradication of poverty and inequality; to peace and the rules of law; and to opportunity for all.

These values must continue to underpin our work on what I believe are three main priorities; climate change, democracy and shared and sustained economic growth.

Climate change threatens the very survival of the Commonwealth. Our members are already suffering unduly with, in some cases, entire populations having to be evacuated inland in some small island states.

And unless we act urgently more and more countries, including in Britain, will suffer heatwaves, droughts, floods, crop failures and migration-induced conflict.

So at talks in Copenhagen next month it is imperative that we send a bold pan-Commonwealth message on what needs to be done. And to let the rest of the world know we stand united and ready to act.

We must also continue to promote electoral freedoms within the Commonwealth because it is clear that a number of countries have yet to embrace democracy fully.

Achieving our ambition to give voice to every single one of our 1.8 billion citizens, should involve building on the success of the Commonwealth Observer Missions which have taken place since 2006.

There is also scope to better use the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and its ability to censure members who seriously or persistently violate basic human rights.

And we can more closely harmonise the work of the numerous Commonwealth Associations which operate across the alliances to promote freedom of the media, civil society and education initiatives.

With the world tackling the most challenging economic conditions for a generation, the Commonwealth also has a crucial role in securing the return to growth. But this must be sustainable and shared to promote the development of all our members.

There is still some way to go: 750 million Commonwealth citizens live in 'dollar-a-day' poverty; 30 million are HIV-positive or suffering with AIDS; and 30 million primary school-age children are not in school.

Commonwealth countries are also falling behind in Millennium Development Goal indicators, including maternal and child deaths, HIV/AIDS, and the elimination of gender inequality.

So there is much to do. But we have much to build with.

The excellent work of the Commonwealth Foundation must be stepped up, for example, along with other development tools at our disposal.

Over the past 20 years intra-Commonwealth trade has expanded from US\$2 trillion to US\$3 trillion per year,

while investment flows have reached over US\$160 billion.

It is strong economic ties such as these that will keep our countries growing and lift our most vulnerable out of poverty.

But the Commonwealth must keep pace with our changing world.

In June 2008, we embraced the reform agenda to ensure that the organisation is fit for the globalised era.

A joint statement set out those guiding principles that all successful institutions share: legitimacy, fair representation, responsiveness and flexibility, transparency and accountability.

So I hope that we will use this Heads of Government Meeting to agree changes that will reinforce our ability to deliver across the three priorities that I have outlined.

The UK remains the single largest contributor to the Secretariat and we will continue to offer the strongest possible support.

But it needs to be strengthened alongside refocusing our attention on the core values that give us a powerful brand.

And I encourage you to join in the Commonwealth Conversation, which is being hosted by the Royal Commonwealth Society ([www.commonwealthconversation.org](http://www.commonwealthconversation.org)), to add your thoughts on the next steps for this unique association of ours.

The process sends an important signal: that the Commonwealth wants to hear what its citizens have to say and how they want the organisation to represent their views.

With half of our population under the age of 25, there is no doubt that the Commonwealth has a great future in the next 60 years and beyond. But I would like to set us one final challenge.

The Commonwealth is unique among international organisations in its credibility and ability to deliver for its people.

But in a globalised world, where the challenges that affect us spread beyond our own borders this is not enough.

From tackling climate change to poverty reduction, the Commonwealth needs to keep pushing beyond its colonial roots and assume a greater global role if it is to transform the lives of its citizens.

With four G8 + five members, five G20 members, more than half of the G87's members, 12 Organisation of the Islamic Conference members and 18 African Union members, there is no single organisation better placed to cross-cut other global divides.

The Commonwealth must use its position to share with the world the values that we cherish and to fulfil its potential as a global lobby on the key 21st Century challenges. **F**



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