

5 October 2017
Catholic Union ‘Craigmyle Lecture’
‘Faith in the Commonwealth’ - by the
Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, The
Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC

I am delighted to be addressing you as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, and on a subject that is particularly close to my heart.

As a committed Christian - a Roman Catholic - faith is at the very core of my being, my thinking, and all that I do.

Faith and respect are also of immense importance in the Commonwealth, bringing together as we do the people of a worldwide family.

People from nations and territories in every continent and ocean cherish the rich diversity of our membership, the deep sense of affinity and kinship we share, and the Commonwealth values and principles that unite us.

Together the Commonwealth numbers 2.4 billion people, a third of the world’s population.

That is twice the number of Roman Catholics there are in the world, according to Vatican figures.

Whether as members of the church, the body of Christ, or as members of the Commonwealth, each one of us has something very special to offer.

As members of a worldwide communion, and as Commonwealth citizens, we gain and draw benefit from vast interconnected networks of mutual support.

Indeed, the Commonwealth is bound together as much by interconnecting networks linking its people, civil society organisations and educational institutions as it is by governments, or by meetings of ministers or officials.

An astute observer, not from one of our member countries, expressed the view that the Commonwealth brings 'soul' to international affairs.

I like to think of it as a 'goodwill' of nations. The special place it holds in the hearts of its citizens brings it strength.

A sense of continuity and building on the best of what we hold in common, enables it to flourish as a powerful influence for good in this changing and turbulent world.

Soon after becoming its Head in 1952, Her Majesty The Queen said of the Commonwealth:

“It is an entirely new conception, built on the highest qualities of the spirit of man: friendship, loyalty and the desire for freedom and peace”.

It is on that new conception, and on those highest qualities of friendship, loyalty, freedom and peace that I would like to focus this evening.

In considering these qualities, and the nature of the Commonwealth, it is striking to see the extent to which its development as a concept, and its terms of scope and membership, has tended to be gradual, responding to alterations in circumstance and changing needs, mimicking the evolution and adaptation of the natural world.

This means that our relationships do not have the feel of an artificial construct, but rather of natural growth and symbiotic development.

The first Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Arnold Smith - a Canadian - said:

“The Commonwealth is a living organism, not a political blueprint. It has developed over the years, not according to any written constitution or central plan, but as a product of a long series of courageous and sometimes very difficult decisions, on immediate and practical issues, by statesmen from many parts of the world.”

Distinctly human in manifestation and expression, built largely on personal encounters and links, Commonwealth connection can be seen as a family tree writ large, with roots going deep and branches spreading wide.

It is a setting within which I feel particularly comfortable, as tenth in a family of twelve children, with a vast extended network of uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, and countless cousins at various removes.

Religious Faith

And then I am a classic child of the Commonwealth, born in the Caribbean, my mother from Dominica, my father from Antigua.

My mother was a devout Roman Catholic and my father a devout Methodist.

She said the Angelus four times a day, he read the Bible every day and was able to quote long passages by heart - his knowledge of scripture was encyclopaedic.

They married in Dominica in 1937 by Papal dispensation.

Indeed, I am told that they were the first couple of different confessions allowed to be married with a full Nuptial Mass in the Catholic Cathedral in Roseau.

Of course this may now be seen simply as a matter of Christian ecumenism, or inter-denominational marriage, but at the time it was regarded as an extraordinary and perhaps even as a shocking occurrence.

The fact that this is no longer the case, and today would barely warrant comment, is perhaps cause for hope and encouragement as we build in more inclusive ways on the commonalities of belief towards greater ecumenism and interfaith understanding.

Faith is sometimes said to represent hope over experience, and this is certainly needed if we are to continue working for peace between communities, religious and non-religious, and among people of different ethnic identity or affiliation.

It is faith which has caused the leaders of the great religions to meet, to engage in dialogue, to listen, and to try to understand each other in greater depth - each strong in their own belief, yet each willing to be channels of peace through which their understanding of the divine can flow.

For those of faith, the belief they each have in the 'eternal other' compels them to seek pathways to understanding, and to walk together along the steep and rugged way of the pilgrim.

The extreme edges of most religions, too, are often very similar - and that is where anger, violence, intolerance and belief in superiority tend to take root, to grow, and to choke the good.

Yet at the heart of all of the great faiths is a yearning for peace, a hunger for justice with kindness, humility, selfless acts of charity, compassion, and love.

Among adherents of all the great faiths, we find a longing for truth and understanding.

As with our human DNA, 99.9% of the message of the great world faiths is the same, providing comfort and succour for those in pain and in need of solace, and a template for a life well lived.

The tragedy of our history is that the norm is to concentrate on the 0.1% which separates us, rather than the 99.9% which unites us.

The 0.1% is always of great importance, probably because it is what distinguishes us one from the other, making us male or female, black or white, strawberry blonde or brunette, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, or of no faith.

Sadly, it not only distinguishes us, it divides us.

The 99.9% is what makes us human, and makes each of us equal in the eyes of the God in whom - in one form or another - the majority of people in the world believe.

Jesus was asked by someone in my profession, the law, “What is the greatest commandment of the law?”

Jesus replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself, on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The two commandments Jesus gives were of course not new. He was drawing on the Hebrew scriptures, and you can find the first commandment in Deuteronomy and the second in Leviticus.

Much of the same spirituality of compassion can be found in the words of the Buddha and in the Sikh and Hindu scriptures.

In the Holy Koran we read: “If anyone saves a person it will be as if he has saved the whole of humanity.”

The Holy Koran also teaches: “We have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other”, a sentiment expressed in their own way by all the great faiths.

In 1953, a young Muslim presented Michael Henderson, a prolific writer on issues of peace, with a book entitled *The Sayings of Mohammed*.

The foreword was by Mahatma Gandhi, who wrote - in 1938:

“I am a believer in the truth of all the great religions of the world. There will be no lasting peace on earth unless we learn, not merely to tolerate, but even to respect other Faiths as our own. A reverent study of the sayings of the different teachers of mankind is a step in the right direction of such mutual respect.”

Gandhi also said, “We have to be the change we wish to see in the world,” and I agree.

That change should start with understanding the basis of all the great faiths and studying them and what joins us.

Commonwealth Diversity and Inclusiveness

In the Commonwealth we celebrate diversity, we respect difference, and we seek to promote understanding - between faiths, ethnic groups, and communities - at every level: local, regional, national, and international.

We try to understand and overcome the many causes of tension and marginalisation - from poverty, to identity, to differences in cultural practices and political beliefs.

Of course tensions continue to be found in the Commonwealth, and there are certainly plenty more in the wider world.

However, we can also point to uplifting Commonwealth successes in the struggles against racism and intolerance, and find encouragement and examples on which to base our faith in a world that is free and fair.

We build in practical ways on what we hold in common, seeking always to find consensus as the basis for collaboration.

Where we cannot find common ground, we seek to disagree well, and to agree even better where we do find concord and are able to take collective action.

It gives me great joy when citizens of the Commonwealth play a proactive role in promoting this harmony between faiths.

An example of this is the work of Professor Nasser David Khalili, who has long been a leading figure in promoting wider understanding of faiths and cultures, insisting that there is far more that unites us as human beings than divides us.

In particular, Professor Khalili has for decades championed the cause of interfaith dialogue and understanding among the three Abrahamic faiths.

I am currently working with him on a Commonwealth Secretariat initiative called 'Faith in the Commonwealth' - the same title I chose for this Craigmyle Lecture.

Nurturing hope and faith in the future should be the work of every government, of civil society, and - perhaps most importantly - of all institutions of education and learning.

The values that people acquire in their formative years and during education will stay with them throughout their lives.

That means living in accordance with our principles, and with a coherent set of values.

As Catholics we look to Holy Scripture, the creeds and historic formularies, and to the magisterium of the Church.

In other contexts, there are other sacred texts, there is cultural expression in literature and art, there are constitutions and bodies of law, and there is the Commonwealth Charter.

The gloriously diverse nature and composition of the Commonwealth means that our values are derived from and are consonant with the practice of all the great religions of the world.

Commonwealth Charter & 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Let me say something about the Commonwealth Charter.

Following extensive national consultations in member states, and with civil society, it was adopted by Heads of Government in December 2012, and signed by Her Majesty The Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, at Marlborough House in March 2013.

It is now the defining document of the Commonwealth, and sets out the core values and principles to which all our member states voluntarily commit themselves.

Significantly, although it was ratified by Heads of Government, the opening words of the Charter are: ‘We the people of the Commonwealth’.

This makes clear once again the distinctively personal rather than institutional way in which

Commonwealth connection and impact are experienced and made manifest.

The sixteen Articles of the Charter - ranging from Democracy, through Tolerance, Respect and Understanding to Gender Equality and Young People - prefigure the seventeen goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, whereby we seek to achieve three extraordinary things in the next fifteen years:

- end extreme poverty,
- fight inequality and injustice,
- fix climate change.

These goals match the ambitions of our Commonwealth Charter, and our 52 member countries collectively are committed to working on them together in a spirit of goodwill and mutual support.

The difference between our sixteen Commonwealth Charter headings, and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, is because the latter treat 'Partnership' separately, whereas we regard it as overarching and integral to each of our ambitions.

As the basis of Commonwealth connection at multiple levels, and the animating principle of all

that we do and aspire to, 'Partnership' is fully covered in the preamble to the Commonwealth Charter - and inspires our approach to every one of its sixteen articles.

Partnership is one of the five 'P's that encompass all that we seek to achieve in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and all that we work for as the Commonwealth family.

The five 'P's are People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships.

In a religious context, Peace has a particular significance, and the theme which is currently providing a special focus for the collective work and thinking of our member states is: 'A Peace-building Commonwealth'.

Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding

The changing nature of violence in today's world is alarming, and it affects us all.

Building peace requires patience, perseverance, and determination to work for the common good in a spirit of respect and understanding.

These are all Commonwealth strengths, and our collective approach is undergirded by the

splendid work of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding.

The Commission was chaired by Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen, and its report, 'Civil Paths to Peace', issued in 2006, brings distinctive Commonwealth insights and perspectives to this pressing area of concern.

Among these is our understanding that it is by building on our multiple identities, and by finding what we hold in common rather than how we are different, that inclusive progress is made towards sustainable peace.

In this context, acting early to prevent violent extremism has to be one of our top priorities. There can be no greater responsibility than ensuring the safety and security of our citizens.

I believe this starts with women and children - which means we need to start in the home and in schools.

If there is not peace in the home, there cannot be peace in our world.

Education about the other, teaching that difference is something to celebrate and not to fear, needs to start in primary schools.

The Commonwealth has for decades supported youth-led organisations and networks to give young people a voice. This has included pioneering the development of youth workers and youth work as a profession.

We need to guide young people towards positive involvement with their peers, and with wider society as nation builders.

Such interventions enable young people to address social exclusion, ethnic or religious prejudice, and politically-motivated violence at grassroots where they can be potent catalysts for inclusion and help avert alienation.

The Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding reminds us that faith has always been a particularly powerful force in the construction of identity.

It goes on to say - as I suggested earlier - that faith is often a force for good; the values of all of the main faiths of the world promote love and understanding, respect and hope, care by the strong for the weak, and societies based on justice, fairness, co-existence and harmony.

The report then says - and I quote: ‘The aim in future must be to strive even harder to recognise and nurture connections between groups on the basis of their multiple identities in order to avoid the pressure of being coalesced into polarised worlds’ - end of quote.

Commonwealth Countering Violent Extremism Unit

Our Commonwealth approach offers valuable insights - overcoming division, finding consensus, building on what is shared.

That is why we have recently established a new dedicated unit within the Commonwealth Secretariat to strengthen national, regional and global action on countering violent extremism.

If extremists can recruit a young person with just three emails, we need to know how and why, so that we can recruit them with our message and inspire them to work instead towards our goals and values.

The new Commonwealth Countering Violent Extremism Unit is supporting our member states with devising and implementing their own national strategies for preventing radicalisation,

and for strengthening their national human rights institutions and the rule of law.

Our Commonwealth way is always to encourage positive engagement, by promoting alternative narratives, strengthening justice institutions, and building platforms for dialogue.

Violence can be defeated, but we need the widest and most inclusive alliances of government, international agencies, civil society organisations, private sector actors, legal bodies, educators, youth workers and healthcare professionals.

We also need to mobilise faith leaders alongside those of no religious belief, and unite in upholding and expressing the values of our common humanity.

Some of the gravest threats to peace among nations and communities arise from the effects of climate change, and their impact on lives and livelihoods and the sustainability of economic and social development.

‘Regenerative Development to Reverse Climate Change’

Over the past several months, at our Commonwealth headquarters in Marlborough House, I convened a series of meetings on ‘Regenerative Development to Reverse Climate Change’, bringing together scientists, environmentalists and other visionary experts.

We considered the existential threat posed to many of our communities - and in some cases entire countries - by the destructive impact of anthropogenic climate change on the delicate balance of life on this planet, and innovative solutions to tackle climate change.

Commonwealth countries are among those most exposed, with Kiribati and Tuvalu highly vulnerable to the effects of sea level rise.

Large parts of Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, Swaziland, Mozambique and Botswana have recently seen rainfall at the lowest levels in 35 years.

The desperate need for coordinated responses and remedial action has been brought home to us with great force over recent weeks and months as we have seen the catastrophic impact of natural disasters and extreme weather.

There have been devastating mudslides in Sierra Leone, and floods in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka with distressingly high death tolls and massive displacement of people.

The terrifying onslaught of Hurricanes Irma and Maria caused widespread destruction in many of our Caribbean islands.

The impact of Irma on Barbuda touched us all as we saw women, children, men and babes-in-arms fleeing their homes, leaving lives uprooted, and livelihoods destroyed.

Even more recently, in Vanuatu in the Pacific, the volcanic eruption of Manaro on the island of Ambae necessitated the evacuation of 6000 people.

It is at times such as this, when some of our most vulnerable small island states have been affected by such immense suffering and disruption, that Commonwealth solidarity and support are most needed and most valued.

The response from Commonwealth members has already been extraordinary.

Yet the threats persist, and we need to prepare to mobilise again, and even more swiftly.

We have to coordinate and work together more effectively.

Much of our Commonwealth engagement is of such value because it is long term, and we take the long view.

Longstanding Commonwealth programmes to reduce vulnerabilities and build social and economic resilience are contributing right now to the effectiveness of the immediate emergency response, and to preparation and planning for longer term recovery.

Our work includes assisting with financial flows, with debt management, and with access to funds through our Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub.

The Commonwealth carries forward vital work to advance cooperation and to strengthen international links and integration.

This leads to the needs of vulnerable nations and communities such as those affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria being addressed more quickly and effectively.

I am currently convening a group of specialists from across the Commonwealth to examine how we can respond even better as a Commonwealth family to coordinate the responses that are so urgently needed.

I hope that together we will be able to coordinate, create and shape a task force.

So by the time we are called upon again to respond, we will have a cohesive contingency plan, with access to humanitarian and financial resources that can be rapidly mobilised, to protect, save and give succour to all who are in need of help and support.

Conclusion

Involving people from all walks of life, and from all member states, and providing opportunities for them to work together in shaping a safer, more equitable world, with inclusive economic growth and development in which all can share, is critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as in measuring up to our shared Commonwealth values and principles.

I am delighted to have had this opportunity of sharing with you something of my own motivation as a committed Catholic seeking to work and

witness to my personal faith within the gloriously diverse international setting of the Commonwealth.

I draw immense comfort and sustenance from knowing that I am in your prayers, and that you will continue to ask for God's blessing to be upon us all as we work for the common good, and for His kingdom.

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