

THIRD DIVERSITY MATTERS FORUM

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Commonwealth Focus on Diversity: Unstarted Business

Text of Keynote Address by Colin Ball, Former Director, the Commonwealth Foundation, 2 March 2005

Let me get to the point straight away.

The world today is beset by the fragmentation and conflict that stem from inequality of power and possession. Such inequality is a permanent breeding ground for the birth and nurturing of manifold divisions: between races, countries, cultures, and religions; and, worse still even between and within communities, friends and neighbours.

And what is being done in response? I would submit to you that in marked contrast to what many governments have done historically, and are still doing, to promote human harmony, tolerance and understanding between diverse peoples within national boundaries, at the global level the answer is very little. Governments, particularly those of the richer and more powerful countries, have become preoccupied – at very great expense indeed - with dealing with the global insecurities which beset us through the hardware of military, security and political action. Very often, since such action often impinges upon human rights and freedoms, the actual effect of such action is to exacerbate rather than ameliorate. Which is why when the most powerful man in the world adopts the phrase “the power of freedom” as his mantra, one wonders !

To draw upon the vocabulary of information technology, we all know, however computer illiterate we may be (I include myself among that number), that the hardware won't work, indeed it is useless junk, without the software, and in particular one central piece of software known as the 'operating system'. If we imagine the world as a giant computer, it is easy to see what its operating system is – it is people and what they do. Meaning the economy, you ask? No, I mean in particular the social capital people create through their interaction. I'll come back to this in a moment.

In making my remark just now, that “very little” is being done at the global level to promote human tolerance, harmony and understanding, I was referring of course to the software. Where is our operating system? I don't see it!

You may say, that this is a harsh, indeed incorrect, judgement. Surely, you may say, the adoption and pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals and in particular that of eliminating poverty, is a tangible investment in the software? Surely that will reduce the inequalities of power and possession of which you have spoken?

In response I would acknowledge what you say. Yes, the elimination of poverty will lessen inequality of possession, and perhaps do something about inequality of power. But as I have said, economy-focused measures alone, or used as a principal means to the ends of which I am talking, need complementing or even given second place to, means of investing in social capital formation. And besides, I would argue that even the investment the world is now making in the war against poverty is tiny compared to what it

per annum) it can't do much, particularly in the field of development, where resource requirements associated with meeting Millennium Development Goals are massive.

So I ask myself, where can and should it be a major player ? Or rather, in what aspect of current human need and endeavour is there a need for intervention?

Surely, the answer lies in another "d-" word: diversity. To come out of my short detour here, and return to my main theme, my view is that the Commonwealth – not just the official, inter-governmental one, but the Commonwealth of peoples, too – is extremely well placed, indeed uniquely placed, to take a much needed lead in developing the social capital that needs to be built if we are to win the war that will enable us all to profit from diversity rather than suffer from division. That must be our goal. Indeed, I would argue that it should be the Commonwealth's main goal. Only if we make diversity our greatest asset can we expect to advance democracy and achieve lasting and sustainable development. The diversity-d is in other words a foundation stone, not decorative ornament.

The official intergovernmental Commonwealth has always had a 'mandate' to take up this fight – it lies in the Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles that was issued by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting of 1971. Let me quote the relevant parts of the Declaration:

- ❑ *"Members of the Commonwealth come from territories in the six continents and five oceans..... They encompass a rich variety of cultures, traditions and institutions....."*
- ❑ *"We recognise racial prejudice as a dangerous sickness threatening the healthy development of the human race and racial discrimination as an unmitigated evil of society."*
- ❑ *"We believe that the wide disparities in wealth now existing between different sections of mankind are too great to be tolerated."*
- ❑ *"We believe that international co-operation is essential to remove the causes of war, promote tolerance, combat injustice, and secure development among the peoples of the world. We are convinced that the Commonwealth is one of the most fruitful associations for these purposes."*
- ❑ *".....We believe that our multi-national association can expand human understanding and understanding among nations, assist in the elimination of discrimination based on differences of race, colour or creed, maintain and strengthen personal liberty, contribute to the enrichment of life for all, and provide a powerful influence for peace among nations."*

Over 30 years have passed since the Singapore Declaration was issued. Over that time the world has become more fragmented and more riddled with conflict. The business heralded by the Declaration remains unstated. Why? I don't think it's fair to blame governments, or the official Commonwealth, for inaction in response to the Singapore Declaration. The fault lies with all of us: we have all worked on a false assumption, I think. We have all been working within our particular part of the global computer on the assumption that the human diversity software has been pre-installed and that it functions automatically so that tolerance, harmony and understanding just happens. No need to upgrade ! Well, that has been a wrong assumption. It doesn't just 'happen': we need new software and it must be more than a new icon on the screen – one tucked away in the "games and accessories" programmes, that we click on every now and then. As I have said, I'm talking about a whole new operating system which is at

Secondly people *want* to be involved. Six years ago the Commonwealth Foundation reported to the 1999 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting on the results of consultation with some 10,000 'ordinary' citizens of the Commonwealth on what they would see as a 'good society'. The elements of such a society were, in their views (views surprisingly common to citizens of all countries, whether developed or less developed): a strong state *and* a strong civil society; a more participative democracy; and a stronger role for people in shaping and carrying out the actions that affect their lives.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Commonwealth Foundation has always been keen and proud to support the commendable initiative of the Australian Multicultural Foundation and the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit in holding this and the previous two Diversity Matters conferences. I know that a specific proposal for the establishment of a Commonwealth Multifaith Advisory Council is being put to this conference. I commend Richard Bourne and Hass Dellal for making it. I would like to see their proposal complemented, or perhaps even subsumed by a Commonwealth Action Programme on Diversity. I would propose that this should be a multi-sectoral programme, involving all three sectors, established independently (rather as the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative was – another great achievement of Richard Bourne) but working in partnership with both the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation and indeed the Commonwealth of Learning. To be effective the Programme would need to be resourced, by governments and the private sector, to the tune of at least £100 million annually. Yes, I am conscious of the fact that that sum is over twice the combined budget of the three official Commonwealth agencies. I make no apology and I do not have my tongue in my cheek: to have an impact the Programme's activities must walk the walk rather than just talk the talk, important as the latter is. The Programme should fund and organise, inter alia:

- ❑ Initiatives that foster and make possible, people to people, culture to culture, community to community and faith to faith contact and consequent understanding, with a particular emphasis on young people and their hearts and minds.
- ❑ A range of action-research and consultative projects that illuminate understanding of what causes division and what works as regards the promotion of human tolerance, harmony and understanding.
- ❑ Parallel to each Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting every two years, mandated by the Heads to report to the Meeting, and under the umbrella of the Commonwealth People's Forum, progress should be reviewed and forward plans made through further *Diversity Matters* conferences.

Ladies and gentleman, in conclusion let me restate here what I said in my valedictory remarks when stepping down as Director of the Commonwealth Foundation recently: the war we should be waging, and which the Commonwealth could and should set a lead to the world by waging, is the one that will make our world a place where we all profit from diversity rather than suffer from it, as we do now. The Commonwealth at present tends to fit its work in the fields of democracy and development into the gaps left by others. Diversity is not a gap. It is a vast and unexplored cavern. It is unstarted business.

Let us take it up, and quickly. We have all been asleep for over thirty years since the Singapore Declaration was issued. It's time to wake up.

Thank you