CRTA/RCS-ACT Submission

Foreign Policy White Paper

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Engagement with our region and the world: A Commonwealth Role

Executive Summary

Far from being a relic of Empire, the modern Commonwealth of Nations is very much a 21st Century soft power organisation, with an unparalleled network of both governments and civil society. Whilst not overstating the importance of the Commonwealth connection, there is no doubt that Australia could benefit significantly from greater engagement with this international, multilateral organisation. As the second largest contributor to the Commonwealth budget after the United Kingdom, Australia can have a particularly influential role to build global support for our objectives.

Successive Australian governments have worked successfully to ensure that the Commonwealth as an organisation accords with our principles, values and international objectives. That having been achieved through the Charter, the management of the Commonwealth through its Secretariat has on occasions been found wanting, leading to uncertainties about its capacity to deliver results and, consequently, its usefulness as a conduit to pursue Australian foreign policy objectives effectively. The Secretariat requires assistance and attention: it needs to be strengthened, including through funding.

Australia could and should use its strategic advantage and strength within the membership to provide leadership at the highest levels and remain engaged positively in practical and bold ways to ensure that the Commonwealth organisation fulfils its potential.

Australia's interests would be better served by a regenerated effort in support of the Commonwealth. The benefits that would accrue to Australia from this deeper engagement need not be disproportionate to the effort involved.

The Commonwealth Round Table in Australia (CRTA) and **the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Branch of the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS)** welcome this opportunity to make a contribution towards public consultation on the preparation of the prospective 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.

We believe that the Commonwealth of Nations (the Commonwealth) has continuing potential to play a positive role in world affairs and that it can make a contribution to the pursuit internationally of Australia's national interests and influence - particularly in our Asia/Pacific region and more widely in the international community.

The modern Commonwealth had distinctive historical beginnings in the former British Empire but it has transcended them and is now a key multilateral organisation essentially grouping English-speaking and common law nations (with the obvious exceptions, for historical reasons, of countries such as Ireland and the United States of America). What has emerged is a unique international organisation based on historical links and political practice and values, consensual decision-making and soft diplomacy.

Far from being a relic of Empire, the modern Commonwealth is very much a 21st Century soft power organisation, with an unparalleled network of both governments and civil society. Commonwealth values, as set out in its Charter, reflect core Australian values and the organisation provides a framework and support group for advancing these values both in our immediate Indo-Pacific neighbourhood and more widely. It is a force for stability and dialogue, with its biennial Heads of Government summits (also known, by the acronym of their full official title, as CHOGMs) and its regular Ministerial meetings of 52 nations providing important opportunities for Australia, the second largest contributor to the Commonwealth budget after the United Kingdom, a particularly influential role to build global support for our objectives.

Underpinning Australia's values

Australia has played a crucial role in setting the course of the modern Commonwealth and in defining its raison d'etre in a 21st century world.

The Commonwealth's values and principles are now set out in the Charter of the Commonwealth adopted in 2012. Agreeing the Charter was a major achievement emerging from the Perth CHOGM in 2011 and its drafting ultimately reflected the commitments of successive Australian governments and the efforts of many individual Australians, in partnership with others.

These values and principles are identified in the Charter as: democracy; human rights; international peace and security; tolerance, respect and understanding; freedom of expression; separation of powers; rule of law; good governance; sustainable development; protecting the environment; access to health, education, food and shelter; gender equality; importance of young people in the Commonwealth; recognition of the needs of small states; recognition of the needs of vulnerable states; and the role of civil society. They are well attuned to Australia's own policies and values and the objectives it pursues in its international relations.

Furthermore, in the area of values the Commonwealth is one of those rare international organisations that backs up its principles politically in a meaningful way. For example, through the work of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group established in 1995 to uphold the Commonwealth statement of fundamental political values in the Harare Declaration, some member governments have altered directions in important ways and others have left the organisation.

Australia a crucial player and influencer in the Commonwealth

Australia, as a founding member and major player in the Commonwealth (including in terms of its budgetary contributions), has a ready-made advantage that we should foster and sustain as a unique element in the much broader suite of our foreign policy engagement.

There are several interlocking dimensions to this, as a means of strengthening bilateral links through common multilateral and developmental objectives.

Australia's membership helps to reinforce our strong and diverse bilateral relationships with Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom and with other Commonwealth member states in Asia and the Pacific ranging from India to Tuvalu. It is also particularly valuable as enabling a direct political connection at the highest level with Anglophone African, Caribbean and Indian Ocean member states, which in numerical terms make up a significant proportion of the international community of nations. As a strong regional player with a global perspective recognised by its membership of the G20, Australia should not discount the extra political linkages and opportunities it gains from Commonwealth membership as a contribution towards its international standing.

The Commonwealth facilitating Australia as a global and regional player

The Commonwealth, representing 52 countries, is a well-recognised global and regional player.

Australia participates strongly in the network of global and regional organisations established through the 20th century to sustain peace and development, open up trade and contain the potential for major armed conflict. The establishment of formal human rights and legal protections were further developments of this multilateral structure. While the Commonwealth's work supports the broad international agenda, its mechanisms are distinctive and different to the role played, for example, by United Nations agencies. Commonwealth membership can be used, however, as a building block for garnering political support for our positions in other international forums. The biennial CHOGM provides a useful mechanism, especially for Head of Government summitry, in this regard.

The particular strengths of the Commonwealth lie in its global reach at senior levels of government and its broad ranging mandate across key issues of democracy, conflict resolution and social development. Its contribution is especially important in the encouragement of democratic institutions and practice among member countries through election monitoring, conflict resolution and support for the rule of law. The Commonwealth can provide a non-threatening 'cover' for useful initiatives and its Secretariat can draw on an extensive network of contacts to identify sources of expertise across a wide range of fields.

Among the areas where valuable Commonwealth work could be done in the future are: addressing the issue of migration (on which the Ramphal Institute has done good initial work); building coalitions of interest and understanding to contribute to global action on climate change, including sharing best practice and technical support; addressing issues of sexual and gender-based violence; and in building communities of understanding across all faiths with a particular emphasis on faith-based approaches to women's empowerment. This is not an exhaustive list but it does demonstrate where

Commonwealth approaches can potentially make useful contributions in pursuit of Australia's international objectives. More work could also be done to enhance the Commonwealth's role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding and to restore its development assistance arm.

The Commonwealth enhancing Australia's international achievements

Australia has a long history of support for the Commonwealth's multilateral political agenda and work. Our continued involvement would help to sustain our role as a respected participant in the multilateral environment, promote Australia's international commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law and enhance Australia's connections at a global level. At a time of increasing fluidity and indeed uncertainty in international relations and structures, the diverse nature of the Commonwealth of Nations, its "soft power" character, its formal commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law (reflecting acknowledged Australian values), its civil society linkages and its geographic spread make it a durable low-key - and relatively low cost - asset to its members, including Australia.

The Commonwealth's significant role in the ending of apartheid in South Africa was an historical high point, as was its assistance in achieving an independent Zimbabwe and Namibia. It also pioneered addressing the problems of small island states at the international level. The organisation's continuing creative capacity was demonstrated in the more recent work of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding, and in the establishment in the Secretariat of the Countering Violent Extremism Unit, which has a mandate to advance the Commonwealth's role in international efforts to counter extremism, especially through civil society networks and education.

Advancing Australia's people to people links internationally

No other international organisation can match the non-governmental networks that underpin the modern Commonwealth. Its deeper strengths and significance go well beyond its formal political role. Australians participate individually or as representatives of Australian institutions in the wide range of non-governmental links within the Commonwealth framework, particularly at senior levels in the universities, scholarships and distance education, education, law and parliament, local government, culture and sport and a wide range of professions. Some Commonwealth institutions are of special significance to Australians, including the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and, in particular, the Commonwealth Games.

….. especially through young people

The majority of people living in the Commonwealth are young people. As a network of countries united by a shared language and similar institutions, the Commonwealth offers opportunities for greater collaboration and mutual exchange between Australia and growth regions in Asia and Africa and centres of excellence like Canada and the United Kingdom. There is scope for encouraging greater mobility in the Commonwealth, especially for young people, by creating more flexible visa agreements and provision of reciprocal scholarship schemes. Increased exchange of young people pursuing education and work opportunities in other Commonwealth countries will benefit Australia and other

Commonwealth countries through knowledge interchange and creating a more efficient market for talent. A recent study undertaken by Commonwealth Exchange, a think-tank which is now part of the RCS in London, has found that there is overwhelming support amongst young people for such arrangements. 80% of young Australians polled supported freer movement to and from such Commonwealth countries as Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, with high levels of support by young people in those countries as well.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth is a very different international organisation which has proved it can achieve results for its member states. Australia has a ready-made and strategic advantage in making the Commonwealth work effectively and usefully to its benefit.

For Australia, the Commonwealth is a relatively low-cost impost on the budget bottom line; it has a membership well-represented and influential in the day-to-day interplay of global and regional politics; it is an instrument of soft diplomacy operating by consensus, with its success resting on skilled dialogue and negotiation. An ongoing commitment at both political and officials levels from member states like Australia is called for if the Commonwealth is to deliver influence and effectiveness into the future. The management of the Commonwealth through its Secretariat has on occasions been found wanting, leading to uncertainties about its capacity to deliver results and, consequently, its usefulness as a conduit to pursue Australian foreign policy objectives effectively. The Secretariat requires assistance and attention, including through funding, to enhance its management effectiveness and operational efficiency.

While it is important not to overstate the Commonwealth's significance for Australia, it is also important not to understate it. At the very least, it has a niche value for our international relations that should not be ignored. We see benefits accruing to Australia from deeper engagement, and the effort involved need not be disproportionate in comparison with those benefits.