



Government Response to the House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee Report HC114 of Session 2012-13:
THE ROLE AND FUTURE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
by Command of Her Majesty

January 2013



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FOURTH REPORT FROM THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE OF SESSION 2012-13

THE ROLE AND FUTURE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

RESPONSE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

1. The Government welcomes the Foreign Affairs Committee's Inquiry into the role and future of the Commonwealth and the findings set out in the Committee's report published on 15 November 2012.
2. The Government is committed to strengthening our engagement with, and role within, the Commonwealth. We believe a strong Commonwealth is important to future prosperity and the national interests of all its member states, and can help us promote UK objectives of democratic values, good governance and prosperity. The UK has consequently played a leading role in efforts to strengthen and reform the organisation to ensure it retains its relevance and impact in the future.
3. Our Commonwealth policy over the last two years has focussed on modernising and improving the Commonwealth's internal institutions, and strengthening respect for its values. We are pleased that modernisation discussions have now reached a conclusion. The Secretary-General and Prime Minister Gillard of Australia, as the current Commonwealth Chair-in-Office, announced on 19 December 2012 that Commonwealth Heads of Government had endorsed a large number of reforms, including a new Commonwealth Charter. This constitutes the most ambitious modernisation of the Commonwealth for more than a decade. Our focus has now turned to implementation of those reforms, and how we can work with a stronger, more confident Commonwealth to advance our objectives. We therefore welcome the Committee's analysis and suggestions.
4. The Government agrees wholeheartedly that the integrity of the Commonwealth's core political and democratic values is vital to its future success. We share the Committee's concerns about perceived weakening of these values. The Committee's conclusions are a welcome endorsement of our recent work to strengthen and protect Commonwealth values more robustly.
5. As we look to make more of the Commonwealth and its networks, we welcome continued scrutiny and support of Parliament, and will seek feedback from the wider Commonwealth networks including civil society, business, media and other institutions.
6. The Command Paper sets out the Government's response to each of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations. The Committee's recommendations are set out in bold followed by the Government's response in plain text. Paragraph and recommendation numbers refer to the Foreign Affairs Committee's report (HC114). The Committee should note that combined responses have been given for recommendation 4 and 5, 27 and 28, and conclusions 29-32.

Conclusions and recommendations

Principles and Values

7. **The strength of the Commonwealth's commitment to its principles and values, including the promotion of human and political rights, has helped to give it a substantial and distinctive role in the international community. However, in recent years the moral authority of the Commonwealth has too often been undermined by the repressive actions of member governments. We were disturbed to note the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms for upholding the Commonwealth's values, despite its efforts to improve governance and the conduct of elections in member states. We urge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to ensure that the Commonwealth Ministers' Action Group makes full use of its new mandate and responds robustly whenever there is corroborated evidence of repression or abuse. (Recommendation 1, Paragraph 28)**
8. The Government agrees that the Commonwealth, as a voluntary association of member states committed to shared values, has a distinctive and valuable role in the international community. In the past, it has not been afraid to suspend or expel member states for breaches of Commonwealth values of democracy, good governance and human rights. The Government acknowledges that in recent years the Commonwealth's reputation and credibility as a values-based organisation has been tarnished by its silence on human rights concerns in some member states. This has been underlined by the evidence gathered by the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) and the Committee. We recognise that one of the Commonwealth's notable strengths lies in its 'quiet diplomacy' work conducted by the Secretary-General and the Commonwealth Secretariat, which is not publicised. But we agree that more must be done to publicise and protect Commonwealth values.
9. This is why our Commonwealth policy has focussed heavily on strengthening Commonwealth values, and the organisation's mechanisms to promote and protect those values. We also strongly supported the EPG process. These highly respected individuals were called upon to make recommendations to sharpen the impact and relevance of the Commonwealth. It is no co-incidence that their headline recommendations related to values. We therefore worked hard to build support for these recommendations, including the Commonwealth Charter, a Commonwealth Commissioner for Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights, and a more vocal role for the Secretary-General.
10. The Government supported and welcomed the reforms of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) adopted at the 2011 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth. As the Committee notes, these empower CMAG with a broader, stronger mandate, and to work more proactively to pre-empt and address serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth fundamental political values. Since Perth, CMAG has made a good start in fulfilling its strengthened mandate. Through its timely and robust response to the political

crisis in the Maldives in February, CMAG Ministers demonstrated that the group could work in new ways and make a positive contribution to international reconciliation efforts. But we would still like to see CMAG demonstrate that it can play a valuable and effective role in addressing a range of situations of concern. We agree with the Committee's recommendation and remain committed to ensuring that CMAG makes full use of its mandate and, in turn, a genuine contribution to peace and stability and high democratic standards across the Commonwealth. Although the UK is not currently a member of CMAG, we will continue to support and challenge serving CMAG members and the Secretary-General to fulfil this vision for CMAG.

11. We conclude that continuing evidence of serious human rights abuses in Sri Lanka shows that the Commonwealth's decision to hold the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo was wrong. We are impressed by the clear and forthright stance taken by the Canadian Prime Minister, who has said he would attend the Meeting only if human rights were improved. The UK Prime Minister should publicly state his unwillingness to attend the meeting unless he receives convincing and independently-verified evidence of substantial and sustainable improvements in human and political rights in Sri Lanka. (Recommendation 2, Paragraph 32)

12. We note the Committee's recommendation on the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2013. We recognise, and share, the concerns of the Committee about the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, particularly in light of the recent dismissal of the Chief Justice following an impeachment process the Sri Lankan Supreme Court ruled illegal. We look to Sri Lanka, as with any other CHOGM host, to demonstrate its commitment to upholding Commonwealth values of good governance and respect for human rights as we have stated publicly. It will also be important that delegations, civil society and media are able to travel and report freely. The concerns of the UK and the wider international community on human rights are regularly relayed to the Government of Sri Lanka. These include issues of media freedom, the need to address longstanding issues of accountability and reconciliation after the war, and the importance of judicial independence. These messages will be reiterated by Alistair Burt, FCO Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, when he next visits Sri Lanka, and in the context of our expectations for CHOGM. It is, however, too early to make decisions about UK attendance at CHOGM. Decisions on attendance are for each Commonwealth member government to take for itself.

Commonwealth Charter

13. We support the Eminent Persons Group's proposal for a Commonwealth Charter. However, the UK should only accept the Charter's final wording if it reflects the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth. Before signing the Charter, the Government should assure itself that substantial progress is being made by the Commonwealth towards compliance with international human rights norms. (Recommendation 3, Paragraph 36)

14. The Government strongly supported the EPG proposal for a Commonwealth Charter to convey clearly the values that the Commonwealth stands for, bringing together commitments set out in previous declarations and affirmations. We are pleased the Charter was agreed by all Heads of Commonwealth Governments, and dated on 14 December 2012. Events to launch the Charter across the Commonwealth are expected to take place during Commonwealth Week from 11-15 March 2013.
15. We see agreement to the Charter as one of the most important outcomes from the Commonwealth modernisation agenda. This is particularly significant at a time when human rights and democratic values are demanded more vocally by citizens across the world. We were pleased to achieve strong new language on the Commonwealth's opposition to all forms of discrimination on any grounds. The Charter is, furthermore, a notable tribute to Her Majesty the Queen in her Diamond Jubilee year as Head of the Commonwealth.
16. We disagree that agreement to the Charter should be conditional on further substantial compliance towards international human rights standards across the Commonwealth. Heads of Government, in Perth, agreed that the Charter would be a non-legally binding document and aspirational in nature. We want the Charter to become a useful tool for holding members accountable to Commonwealth values. It should also become a standard for future members to aspire to. The onus will be on member governments to promote actively the Charter in their countries. We plan to raise the profile of the Charter here in the UK, with a focus on Parliament, civil society and youth organisations. The Charter cannot exist in a vacuum.

Commissioner for Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights

17. **We recognise that the Eminent Persons Group's proposal for a Commissioner for Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights has not found favour right across the Commonwealth. There is clearly room for discussion and negotiation about the nature of the role, including its title. It is important that it should not duplicate the responsibilities of the Secretary-General and the Ministerial Action Group. However, the intention behind the recommendation for a Commissioner is an important one, and goes to the heart of what the Commonwealth is about. (Recommendation 4, Paragraph 40)**
18. **The UK Government should insist that the key elements of the EPG's recommendation for a Commissioner are accepted and implemented. In particular, we believe that it is important that the mechanism that emerges from the negotiations should reflect the EPG's recommendation that the Commissioner should provide "well researched and reliable information" on "serious or persistent violations of democracy, the rule of law and human rights in member states," and "indicate approaches for remedial action." (Recommendation 5, Paragraph 41)**
19. The Government supports the Committee's conclusion and recommendation. We backed strongly the proposal for a Commissioner for Democracy, Rule of Law and

Human Rights in the run up to CHOGM, and were pleased it was not rejected outright in Perth. Further discussion of the proposal was devolved to CMAG and the Secretary-General. We shared the view of the Committee that there should be flexibility on the nature of the role, including the title, and reflected this view in discussions with Commonwealth partners.

20. At the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers' meeting in New York in September 2012, it was confirmed by the Chair of CMAG and the Secretary-General that there was no consensus on the proposal. There was an overwhelming view that a Commissioner would duplicate the roles of CMAG and the Secretary-General. CMAG therefore "examined the need identified by the EPG: the requirement for enhanced access to reliable and relevant information for both CMAG and the Secretary-General, with a view to lifting the level of engagement with member countries, in accordance with their respective mandates". The Secretary-General announced that additional resources would be allocated to enhance this engagement with member states, and to support the work of CMAG and the Secretary-General's Good Offices programmes.
21. The Government is disappointed that the Commissioner proposal was not agreed. We agree with the Committee's recommendation that even though the Commissioner proposal has now been dropped, the intention behind it remains important. Reliable and relevant information about serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth values in member states is essential to enable CMAG, and the Secretary-General to fulfil their roles. And, as stated above, the ability to protect its core values is central to the identity of the Commonwealth. We welcome the Secretary-General's commitment to allocate additional resources within the Secretariat to support a well-informed CMAG which is better equipped to prevent serious violations of Commonwealth values of democracy, good governance and human rights. We look to him to ensure this translates into concrete action, and is incorporated into the Secretariat's new four-year Strategic Plan (2013-2016).

Reforming the Commonwealth Secretariat

22. **The Commonwealth has in the past often launched influential initiatives on key global issues. However, it has appeared less active and less publicly visible in recent years and there is disturbing evidence that it is missing opportunities to influence events. The Commonwealth Secretariat must sharpen, strengthen and promote its diplomatic performance—along the lines proposed by the Eminent Persons Group— if the Commonwealth is to realise its full potential as a major player on the world stage. (Recommendation 6, Paragraph 52)**
23. The Government welcomes this recommendation, which recognises the Commonwealth's past contributions and its potential to influence global issues in the future. We would argue that the examples highlighted by the Committee demonstrate that the Commonwealth has made positive contributions in recent years. The Special Session on Climate Change at the Port of Spain CHOGM in 2009 resulted in a strong Commonwealth Climate Change Declaration ahead of the UN climate change negotiations in Copenhagen. At the Perth CHOGM in 2011

Commonwealth leaders agreed a shared approach to tackling the challenge of food insecurity. In August 2012 Commonwealth Education Ministers agreed a set of core recommendations to support achievement of the Millennium Development Goals on education and to feed into the post-2015 development agenda. But we recognise that examples such as these have been limited, and not sufficiently visible, and that more could be done.

24. We agree with the Committee, and the recommendations of the EPG, that the Commonwealth should sharpen its focus in order to maximise its impact. The Department for International Development's (DFID) Multilateral Aid Review concluded that, while the Commonwealth could potentially play a significant role in development, the Secretariat lacked focus in its activities and its potential was not being realised. The Government has engaged constructively with the Secretariat over the last two years to help it strengthen its performance on internal management and oversight systems, and make its work more strategic and impact focussed. We have stressed that the Secretariat's new Strategic Plan presents a unique opportunity to refocus Commonwealth programmes on the areas where it can add more value than other organisations, and have worked to build support for this approach with the wider membership. We believe that the Secretariat's key strengths include its advocacy role to support and represent the interests of small states, global networking and convening power, and the specialist advisory services it offers to member states. We welcome progress made to date and call on the Secretary-General to deliver without further delay a well prioritised plan focussed only on areas of Commonwealth comparative advantage. To complement this, the organisation must also improve its ability to communicate its achievements.

25. It is now nearly a year since the acceptance of many Eminent Persons Group recommendations at the 2011 CHOGM. The lengthy period of consultation and discussion over the EPG since October 2011 must not cause a loss of momentum in the process of implementing those recommendations. The FCO should monitor implementation closely, and should continue to press for action on all key recommendations, reporting back to this Committee on progress every six months. (Recommendation 7, Paragraph 54)

26. The Government agrees strongly on the need to ensure momentum on implementation of the EPG recommendations. The Commonwealth Secretariat already reports regularly to the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors on implementation of those recommendations for which it is responsible. We recognise that the process to consider the outstanding recommendations has been lengthy. But rigorous consideration of these has helped us successfully achieve agreement to a large majority of the recommendations. Implementation is key. Our objective is to ensure that relevant reforms are integrated swiftly into the Secretariat's new Strategic Plan. The onus is not solely on the Commonwealth Secretariat. A number of the recommendations fall to member governments to implement. The Government undertakes to monitor this closely and to assess the impact of the adopted reforms. We will report back to the Committee on progress.

A cornerstone of foreign policy?

- 27. As Minister of State, Lord Howell worked very effectively to raise the profile of the Commonwealth in the UK and overseas, and he deserves considerable credit for his contribution. (Recommendation 8, Paragraph 57)**
28. The Government agrees that Lord Howell, supported by an enlarged Commonwealth Team in the FCO, made a significant contribution to raising the profile of the organisation. His expert knowledge of the Commonwealth and its networks and his personal belief in its soft power potential helped to reinvigorate our engagement with Commonwealth organisations. He was, and remains, well-respected in Commonwealth circles and convincing in his arguments about the future of the organisation. We welcome Sir Malcolm Rifkind's assessment that the Government "has been more committed to the Commonwealth, not just in rhetoric but in policy, than any Government I can remember, Tory or Labour, for the last 25 or 30 years".
29. The Rt. Hon. Hugo Swire MP was appointed as Minister of State with responsibility for Commonwealth Affairs on 4 September 2012. Mr Swire is a strong, enthusiastic supporter of the Commonwealth, who has already played an important role in ensuring a good outcome at the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers' meeting in New York. He delivered a keynote speech on Britain and the Commonwealth at the Royal Commonwealth Society on 18 December 2012, and has been working to raise the profile of the Commonwealth in the UK media.
- 30. Despite Lord Howell's enthusiastic advocacy, we are concerned that the UK Government as a whole has not had a clear and co-ordinated strategy for its relations with the Commonwealth. The several Government departments with an interest in Commonwealth matters should work together to develop a strategy for engagement with the Commonwealth, aimed at ensuring that the UK makes the most of the opportunities presented by the Commonwealth. The FCO needs to ensure its 'warm words' are substantiated by its actions. (Recommendation 9, Paragraph 62).**
31. We accept the Committee's recommendation and agree on the importance of a co-ordinated approach across government departments on relations with the Commonwealth. Commonwealth issues are covered by a wide range of departments across Whitehall including, among others, the Department for International Development, the Department for Environment and Climate Change, the Ministry of Justice, and the Government Equalities Office. The FCO works closely with these departments, including to develop strong UK negotiating positions ahead of Commonwealth meetings. Following the success of our pre-CHOGM 2011 Director-level Whitehall engagement process on Commonwealth policy priorities, we have continued to build on these relationships to co-ordinate more closely on joint priorities, and actively encourage Ministerial attendance at pan-Commonwealth meetings. We will continue to hold regular meetings with Whitehall colleagues, at senior official and Ministerial level as necessary, including ahead of CHOGM in 2013.

32. We conclude that the treatment of the Eminent Persons Group report by a number of Heads of Government at Perth has damaged the Commonwealth's reputation. (Recommendation 10, Paragraph 67)

33. The Government believes that the overall EPG process was consultative and transparent. Civil society and members of the public, as well as governments, were able to feed in views on the direction of the recommendations. This was positive for the Commonwealth. It enabled these groups to inform the modernisation process and helped ensure that the final reform recommendations represented the interests of the broader Commonwealth family, not just governments.

34. The UK Government facilitated events to raise the profile of the report and stimulate discussion across the Commonwealth including in Tanzania, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, as well as in the UK. We agree, therefore, that it was disappointing that the EPG report was not made publicly available ahead of CHOGM, as requested by the group. But we welcomed its subsequent publication during CHOGM. On balance, we do not judge that this damaged the overall reputation of the Commonwealth, though it did raise questions about the priorities of some Commonwealth governments. It is important that all Commonwealth governments embrace the opportunities to raise the profile of the Commonwealth through free and frank discussion and challenge.

The role of Ministers

35. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office should be much more proactive across Whitehall in ensuring that Ministers participate in Commonwealth meetings where there is a clear UK interest in the outcome. (Recommendation 11, Paragraph 71)

36. We agree on the importance of UK Ministers attending Commonwealth meetings where there is a clear UK interest in the outcome, and we are committed to encouraging other Whitehall departments to consider participation. Most recently, we welcomed the attendance of Tim Loughton, the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families at the Department for Education, at the 18th Commonwealth Education Ministers Meeting in Mauritius in August 2012. Our High Commission in Port Louis and FCO officials provided support for his visit. The Government aims to send representatives to all Commonwealth Ministerial meetings. But we recognise decisions on the level of attendance will be based on departments' resources, and other commitments at the time. They will also depend on the effectiveness of those meetings to deliver results. This is why we have focussed so strongly on improving working practices and structures to increase Commonwealth effectiveness.

Resources for the diplomatic effort

37. We believe that the Government already makes a good return on its modest investment in relations with the Commonwealth. Given the unrealised potential of the Commonwealth, the UK could usefully invest more. In its

programme of reopening posts across the world, and in the plans for the staffing of Whitehall departments, the Government should maintain and strengthen links with the Commonwealth. The Committee praises the recent announcement by the Foreign Secretary that the UK and Canada will share premises and services at missions abroad. (Recommendation 12, Paragraph 76)

38. The Government agrees with the Committee's conclusion that it makes a good return on its investment in relations with the Commonwealth. Ministers and officials in the FCO and across Government contribute to this. The Government has increased, to six officials, its full time resource working on the Commonwealth within the FCO. But the total number of people who work on Commonwealth issues in the department is much greater. For example, departments dealing with bilateral political relations with Commonwealth member countries inevitably integrate Commonwealth issues in their work. And thematic departments who deal with issues such as human rights and climate change are increasingly seeing the Commonwealth as a useful network to advance these priorities. Furthermore, our network of High Commissions around the Commonwealth and political, prosperity and commercial officers will all, at times, work on Commonwealth issues. To focus excessively on the nucleus of staff who work full time on the Commonwealth in the FCO is too narrow an interpretation. The resource we commit to the Commonwealth is, in fact, far greater.
39. Within the context of the FCO's Comprehensive Spending Review settlement, this Government is committed to maintaining a strong and highly skilled global footprint through its network of Embassies and High Commissions. As a result of extensive work through the Network Shift programme to focus FCO resources on the fastest growing regions, the Government is increasing the UK presence in some Commonwealth countries. We opened a new Deputy High Commission in Hyderabad in May 2012, and another is planned to open in Chandigarh. We have strengthened our commercial capacity in our High Commissions in Commonwealth countries in Canada, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Mozambique, Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon, Papua New Guinea and Guyana.
40. Ministers are devoting more time to our friends in the Commonwealth. In both 2011 and 2012 FCO Ministers visited approximately 20 Commonwealth countries and met many colleagues from Commonwealth countries in London.
41. The Government welcomes the Committee's endorsement of our recent announcement on co-location with Canada. We are committed to strengthening our relationships with our Commonwealth partners. We believe that co-location of Embassies, where it is of mutual benefit, supports closer co-operation, as well as leading to efficiency savings. It allows us to share corporate services and office space, giving both governments a bigger reach at a lower cost. We routinely consider co-location options when making decisions about our overseas estate.
42. We are already co-located with Commonwealth partners in a number of locations overseas. For example, in Kabul with New Zealand, in Vientiane with Australia and in Rangoon and Bamako with Canada. We are actively pursuing further co-

location opportunities with Australia, Canada and New Zealand where it is of mutual benefit.

- 43. We urge the Government to make the fullest possible use of the Commonwealth's informal networks. Although formal diplomatic processes will always be important, the highly developed and well-established networks of "the people's Commonwealth" offer excellent opportunities for the exercise of "soft power", which can also be more cost-effective than the work of the official institutions of the Commonwealth. We would welcome a clear statement of the UK Government strategy for engagement with the informal Commonwealth. (Recommendation 13, Paragraph 78)**
44. The Government agrees that one of the strengths of the Commonwealth is its informal networks. DFID's Multilateral Aid Review concluded that one of the Commonwealth's key strengths lay in its unique network of networks. And that by providing a platform for partnerships established through these networks, the Commonwealth was realising great potential. The Government strongly supports the role of civil society in the Commonwealth.
45. We place great value on the Commonwealth using its non-governmental networks for advocacy, consensus building on global issues, in facilitating South-South, North-South cooperation and making the voices of small and vulnerable states heard. Business, civil society and parliamentary links are central to the success of the Commonwealth. These networks help increase prosperity, strengthen democracy, and support development. At the same time, Commonwealth civil society organisations must meet, and operate in compliance with, the criteria for accredited Commonwealth organisations, and demonstrate a commitment to upholding Commonwealth values.
46. We have provided funding to support these networks; including funding the Commonwealth Foundation to engage civil society in the People's Forum at CHOGM, and the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council to run the Youth Forum at CHOGM. Ministers hold regular meetings with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Commonwealth. Ministers and officials regularly meet with organisations within the Commonwealth family. FCO officials sit on the boards and executive committees of some key Commonwealth institutions, for example the Royal Commonwealth Society and the Commonwealth Foundation. We take every opportunity to promote and support access by non-governmental organisations to the Commonwealth's processes, for example attendance at CHOGM and Ministerial meetings. And we will work with the Commonwealth Foundation in the run up to CHOGM 2013 to ensure the People's Forum at CHOGM encourages active civil society participation.

Accountability to Parliament

- 47. Parliament, and especially this Committee, can play a part in a more serious and sustained UK approach to Commonwealth issues. After every CHOGM and other major Commonwealth meeting, we will invite the Foreign Secretary**

and FCO Permanent Under Secretary to report on the outcome of that meeting and to report on what governments, the Secretariat and other Commonwealth agencies have done to implement previous Commonwealth decisions. (Recommendation 14, Paragraph 80)

48. The Government welcomes this recommendation and fully agrees that the Committee, and Parliament, can play a key role in the UK's reinvigorated approach to the Commonwealth. We are working closely with Parliament on Commonwealth issues, including the launch of the Commonwealth Charter this year. We regularly engage with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and welcomed the establishment of the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Commonwealth in March 2012. Mr Swire, Minister of State for the Commonwealth, addressed the group in November 2012. The Foreign Secretary and Permanent Under Secretary would welcome the opportunity to report on the outcome of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, and other relevant Commonwealth meetings, and implementation of previous Commonwealth decisions.

BBC World Service cuts

49. We stand by the conclusions of our previous report on the BBC World Service. The Government needs to see the big picture when considering the funding of the BBC World Service, not least the fact that the vacuum left by departing services could quickly be filled by others. Modest savings achieved through ill-thought-out cuts could lead to a damaging loss of influence in highly important countries, including a number of Commonwealth countries. (Recommendation 15, Paragraph 84)

50. The BBC World Service is a highly valued and trusted voice for Britain in the world. The Spending Review in 2010 meant that the FCO, like all government departments, had to take difficult decisions. It was only fair that the World Service, as a publicly funded body, should play its part in reducing the deficit by reducing spending and making savings. The reductions were consistent with the settlements provided to other publicly funded bodies.

51. The World Service has editorial, managerial and operational independence. Their decisions on how best to manage their reduced budget took into account changes in audience access, including the move away from radio and towards television and online services. For example, the closure of the dedicated *English for the Caribbean* regional service, which stood at 2 hours and 45 minutes a week, was mitigated by around 80% of the total population of the Caribbean still being able to access World Service English on FM radio.

52. From 2014, the new arrangements for World Service funding will provide greater financial stability and certainty as licence fee funding arrangements will allow the BBC to plan over longer periods.

Losing credibility on development

- 53. The Commonwealth's performance as a provider of development aid has been disappointing in recent years, and needs to improve substantially if its reputation is to be restored. We look to the UK Government to keep the development performance of the Secretariat under close scrutiny and to keep to its stated intention to provide further funding only on convincing evidence of improvement. (Recommendation 16, Paragraph 88)**
54. The Committee's findings reflect those of DFID's Multilateral Aid Review in 2011. DFID will be updating their assessment of the Commonwealth Secretariat's development programmes in early 2013, and this will inform decisions on further funding to the Secretariat. We believe that the Secretariat can play an influential role on development, for example in shaping the post 2015 development agenda, where it could provide intellectual leadership and be an important voice. But the Secretariat does not deliver assistance for poverty reduction as effectively as others and, in line with recommendations from the Multilateral Aid Review needs to focus on areas of comparative advantage and strengthen its management and oversight systems. As set out above, we are engaging closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat to help them deliver improvements.

Enabling trade and investment

- 55. The evidence for the existence of a special "Commonwealth factor" in trade and investment is not conclusive, despite the sustained and vigorous growth in many of the Commonwealth's emerging markets, but the potential for this to develop in the years ahead is enormous and should be given a high priority by H.M. Government. (Recommendation 17, Paragraph 92)**
56. We agree that the Commonwealth network has influence in nearly every international country grouping, making it a key vehicle for cooperation in a rapidly changing global landscape. We are committed to strengthening trade links with partners across the world. That means within the EU, within the Commonwealth and beyond. Soft power is a key part of the Government's Emerging Powers strategy, and a means to strengthen our influence in a changing world. The Commonwealth is one of the networks we can use to forge people to people links and partnerships with emerging powers. Commonwealth members share principles of democracy, similar legal systems and shared language. These provide solid foundations for doing business and a potentially useful platform for future trade and investment.

The UK interest in trade and investment with the Commonwealth

- 57. We are not convinced that member states are making the most of the economic and trading opportunities offered by the Commonwealth. There may not be a distinctive "Commonwealth factor" in trade and investment, but the Government should do more to help create such a factor. In particular, we agree with Lord Howell's remark that the UK should "concentrate ... very much more" on seeking finance for infrastructure projects in the UK from**

sovereign wealth funds, including those in fast-growing Commonwealth countries. (Recommendation 18, Paragraph 98)

58. The Government agrees that it should make more of opportunities to develop trade and investment across the Commonwealth. The UK tends to capture a larger share of the total import market in Commonwealth countries than in non-Commonwealth countries. And our comparative trade performance is generally better than that of France, Germany and Italy (using the EU-3 benchmark) in Commonwealth countries. We are working to leverage this “Commonwealth effect” to support both the Emerging Powers initiative and work on emerging African economies. The UK is one of four countries, alongside China, Kuwait and Trinidad and Tobago, bidding to host the headquarters of the International Forum of Sovereign Wealth Funds which will help strengthen relationships with wealth funds from across the world. The Prime Minister is committed to securing London as the permanent home of the Forum. A decision is expected to be made in early 2013.
- 59. We also note with concern the doubts about the current value to the UK of the Commonwealth Business Council (CBC), and welcome the FCO's intention to take the opportunity of the appointment of a new Director General of the CBC to explore the possibility of a closer and more fruitful relationship. However, we do not believe that this limited initiative will make the most of the economic opportunities offered by the Commonwealth. We recommend that the Government should set out, by the end of 2012, a five-year strategy to increase the benefits to the UK of trade and investment with Commonwealth countries. (Recommendation 19, Paragraph 99)**
60. The Director General of the Commonwealth Business Council (CBC) resigned from his position in July 2012. Officials have met the Acting Director General. As with all accredited Commonwealth organisations, we look to the CBC and other organisations working to increase intra-Commonwealth trade, to act in compliance with the criteria for organisations accredited to the Commonwealth. We agree with the Committee that engaging with the CBC alone will not make the most of the broader economic opportunities. The Government is doing a number of other things already to enhance our trade objectives. As noted in paragraph 39, we are strengthening commercial capacity in our High Commissions in Commonwealth countries in Canada, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Mozambique, Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon, Papua New Guinea and Guyana. We are strengthening our presence in Commonwealth countries, for example opening a new Deputy High Commission in Hyderabad, and another planned to open in Chandigarh. We are also working hard to ensure the EU signs new Free Trade Agreements with four Commonwealth countries so that UK companies can gain access to these markets. Talks with Singapore concluded successfully last month, and we expect the Agreement to be signed in the Spring. Negotiations with Canada, India, and Malaysia are ongoing.
61. Trade is not just about narrow economic policies; companies need a conducive business environment underpinning trade policy. The common language and similar legal systems across the Commonwealth contribute to this. We believe that the broader Commonwealth, including the Secretariat, working with Commonwealth governments can also support the business environment and

create favourable conditions for intra-Commonwealth trade. For example: through building effective and stable national institutions; strong anti-corruption practices; and strong public procurement mechanisms in Commonwealth countries. We have encouraged the Commonwealth Secretariat to include an emphasis on these areas in its new Strategic Plan, which will, in turn, build the basis for greater trade and investment.

62. The Government is committed to working more closely with Commonwealth partners and Parliament to boost trade opportunities and support business links. The FCO's Charter for Business already sets out how we aim to support UK business. But the key is to encourage more UK businesses to take a closer look at trade with members of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Business Forums in the margins of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings have been significant gatherings of senior leaders from government and business, which helped lay the foundations for companies to network, develop relationships, discuss contracts and create jobs. We will continue to work to ensure that we utilise the opportunities and benefits such events create.

A Commonwealth Free Trade Area?

- 63. There is currently much debate about a possible re-evaluation of the relationship between the UK and the EU, and the economic opportunities presented by the Commonwealth certainly play a part in that debate. However, many other considerations, including for instance economic relations with such countries as China and the United States, will undoubtedly play a bigger role. It is clear that the creation of a free trade area with Commonwealth countries would require a fundamental and potentially risky change in the UK's relationship with the European Union, and the benefits may not outweigh the disadvantages. (Recommendation 20, Paragraph 102)**
64. The Government shares the Committee's assessment that a Commonwealth Free Trade Area would be difficult to negotiate, given the implications for EU members of the Commonwealth including the UK. As highlighted in a recent opinion piece by former EPG member and international commentator Sir Ronald Sanders, the UK's earning from exports to Commonwealth members, while significant at 9.76% in 2011, is a way off the 43.6% figure for the UK's earnings to the EU. We agree that there are more promising avenues which we could pursue to create the conditions in which trade and prosperity can flourish in the Commonwealth.
65. The Government is pleased to note that there are already a number of EU trade agreements with Commonwealth member states and, as noted in paragraph 60, some under negotiation. These include the EU-South Africa agreement, the EU-CARIFORUM Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), EU Pacific EPA and several African EPAs. There is also access to EU trade preferences – the GSP scheme – which offers developing countries reduced tariff rates and Least Developed Countries duty free quota free access to EU markets. All of which contribute towards trade between Commonwealth countries. The Government is also working with Commonwealth countries to secure multilateral trade agreements

at the World Trade Organization in Geneva, to help improve the global trading environment. This Government is strongly committed to significantly expanding trade between the UK and other Commonwealth countries.

Education and scholarships

66. We note that part of the funding for Commonwealth Scholarships now comes from institutions of higher education. We are concerned that this could develop into an unsustainable burden on the limited funds available to those institutions. We recommend therefore that, recognising the importance of the Scholarships for the achievement of the UK's objectives, the Government should guarantee to maintain at least the current level of funding in real terms. (Recommendation 21, Paragraph 109)

67. The Government notes that part of the funding for Commonwealth Scholarships comes from institutions of higher education and agrees that scholarships are important to achieving UK objectives. The Government is maintaining the current level of funding and we are pleased that DFID has agreed to provide a total of £87 million for Commonwealth scholarships for developing countries over the four year period from 2011/12 to 2014/15. This represents a modest increase in real terms compared to the previous funding period, and should fund some 800 new awards a year. Decisions on funding beyond 2014/15 will be taken towards the end of the current funding period. They will be informed by work currently being undertaken by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission to evaluate the impact on development and value for money of their Scholarship and Fellowship programmes.

68. In light of DFID's major contribution, the FCO no longer contributes to the Commonwealth Scholarships programme. However, we continue to fund the Chevening Scholarships programme. This funds over 700 postgraduate students each year from around the world, and includes over 200 students from Commonwealth countries in 2012/13. These scholarships are aimed at educating and building lasting relationships with future leaders and decision-makers in a wide range of fields, including but not limited to development-related subjects. There is an increasing focus on awards to students from the fastest growing economies and emerging markets. FCO funding of Chevening Scholarships totalled £17 million in 2012/13. Decisions on funding for Chevening scholarships beyond 2014/15 will be taken towards the end of the current funding period.

69. We believe that Commonwealth Scholarships are a cost-effective way of widening opportunities for young people across much of the Commonwealth. They also help the UK to achieve some important diplomatic goals. If the Government's commitment to revitalising the UK's relationships with the Commonwealth is to mean anything, the numbers of Commonwealth scholarships should increase. A special new scholarship scheme would be a very fitting way to mark the Queen's Jubilee. The suggestions made for part-funding by the private sector are promising. We urge the Government to announce a competition for the first Queen's Jubilee Scholarships. (Recommendation 22, Paragraph 111)

70. We agree that Commonwealth Scholarships help achieve important diplomatic goals and strengthen our relationships with other nations. As set out above, the Government supports two scholarship programmes open to Commonwealth students: the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan and Chevening Scholarships.
71. In addition to these programmes, the British Council launched Jubilee Scholarships to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee year. This award enables students from India to take a one-year Masters programme in management, manufacturing, science or technology at UK universities, followed by a short term internship programme in the UK. Sixty Jubilee scholarships have been awarded this year.
72. It should also be noted that the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust, set up in 2012 to provide a lasting legacy to mark the Queen's contribution to the Commonwealth and chaired by Sir John Major, is looking to include a programme aimed at supporting young people across the Commonwealth.
- 73. The suggestions made to us by Professor Dilks for strengthening the education and engagement work of the Commonwealth, through such means as medical, teacher and youth exchanges, and greater attention to the Commonwealth in school curricula, deserve serious consideration. They appear to be cost-effective ways of raising the public profile of the Commonwealth. The Government and the Commonwealth Secretariat should urgently examine their feasibility. (Recommendation 23, Paragraph 113)**
74. The Government is considering Professor Dilks' suggestions. The Government understands the importance of strengthening health and education links across the Commonwealth. We recognise that the Commonwealth and its networks play an important role in helping to advance progress on the Millennium Development Goals, including on health. The British Council is committed to working with partners, including the Commonwealth, to develop and secure educational and other opportunities for young people.
75. The Government shares Professor Dilks' view about the benefits youth exchanges can bring, and is a strong supporter of the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council and its projects. DFID already has a global education programme for schools called 'Connecting Classrooms'. This is designed to help young people learn about global issues and become responsible global citizens, as well as giving them the skills to work in a global economy. Launched in June 2012, it brings together the best elements of two programmes previously funded by DFID (the Global School Partnerships Programme) and the British Council (also called Connecting Classrooms). UK schools are supported to link with schools around the world (in both developed and developing countries) on global curriculum projects through partnerships; an interactive online platform; grants for teachers to visit their partner schools; professional development for teachers and school leaders; and the International School Award. The programme also offers policy makers the chance to share good practice with, and learn from, international counterparts. Over three years, the programme will support over 5,600 schools

globally to form sustainable school partnerships (2,600 partnerships) and 31,000 schools to collaborate online. Over 15,000 teachers will be trained and 700 will have their professional skills accredited by universities. 3,300 teachers overseas will also receive leadership training and 6,600 schools will achieve international school award status.

76. This year, DFID will also be supporting a development education programme called the Global Learning Programme (GLP) that will mean more school leavers in England have thorough knowledge and understanding of global poverty and the ways it can be reduced. The GLP will support schools to incorporate development education into their curriculums. DFID is seeking to fund comparable programmes in devolved education systems in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

77. We believe it is important that young people in the Commonwealth benefit from the Commonwealth's multiple networks. We agree with Professor Dilks that the Commonwealth deserves serious consideration in school curricula. Lord Howell wrote to the Secretary of State for Education in April 2012 about making more of the Commonwealth in schools. There are already resources available online for each of the key stages, produced by the Royal Commonwealth Society. In Michael Gove's reply to Lord Howell, he highlighted that, following a review of cultural education in England, the Department for Education is making £15 million available over the next three years to ensure that all pupils can engage in a variety of cultural activities. We will liaise with the Arts Council England and the Department for Education to explore how Commonwealth education can be promoted in schools. We also hope that the new Commonwealth Charter will be used in schools and become a useful tool to increase awareness of the Commonwealth among young people. Commonwealth Day presents further opportunities for youth engagement.

78. When considering its policy on immigration, the Government must bear in mind the possibly serious effects of a restrictive student visa policy on the wider interests of the UK, including the economic and diplomatic benefits brought to the country by Commonwealth students. (Recommendation 24, Paragraph 116)

79. The Government believes that legal immigration has enriched our culture and strengthened our economy. The UK attaches great importance to its strong relationships with all 54 Commonwealth countries. This is one of the reasons why, since 1972, the immigration rules have provided a UK Ancestry route which allows Commonwealth nationals who have a UK-born grandparent and are over the age of 17, to enter the UK, work and settle here.

80. The Government takes every opportunity to make clear that Britain remains open for business, and talented international students are welcome here. We want to attract and retain the brightest and best students who will help drive growth in the economy. The UK offers good access for Commonwealth students: those with the right qualifications, sufficient funds and a good level of English can come. There is no limit on the number of students who can come to the UK.

81. The UK policy on freedom of movement within the Commonwealth is to treat Commonwealth nationals the same as other nationals from outside the EU and EEA. This is to protect the UK both in terms of national security and helping to control net migration.

The future membership of the Commonwealth

82. We welcome the fact that the Commonwealth continues to attract interest from potential new members, and see advantages in greater diversity and an extended global reach for the Commonwealth. However, it is crucial that the application process is rigorous and that any new members are appropriate additions to the Commonwealth ‘family’, closely adhering at all times to its principles and values. The UK Government must ensure that these membership criteria are fully observed with every application, if necessary employing its veto in suitable cases. (Recommendation 25, Paragraph 122)

83. The Government agrees with the Committee’s recommendation and welcomes applications to join the Commonwealth from countries that can demonstrate the necessary requirements and dedication to the Commonwealth’s core values, particularly in relation to human rights, good governance and rule of law. The Government agrees that the application process should be rigorous. Support from the Commonwealth and the international community, including the UK, in areas such as governance helps prospective governments make progress in meeting criteria for membership. We will also work to raise the profile of the Commonwealth Charter, nationally and across the Commonwealth, and hope that it becomes established as an important benchmark to ensure existing and future members uphold the Commonwealth’s values.

84. The Government regularly discusses human rights, good governance and rule of law issues with aspiring members, including during our dialogue on development assistance. We will continue with these discussions both within the Commonwealth and on a bilateral basis.

Overseas Territories

85. We conclude that there are substantial arguments in favour of stronger connections between the Commonwealth and the Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories, all of which can benefit from closer relationships, especially with the smaller independent states of the Commonwealth. We note the apparently increasing interest in the Crown Dependencies in stronger connections with the Commonwealth, in some cases including associate status. (Recommendation 26, Paragraph 142)

86. While we are not aware of any formal request by the Crown Dependencies to join the Commonwealth, we are aware of their desire to build stronger links with the Commonwealth. We are happy to explore this with the Crown Dependencies, bearing existing constitutional relationships in mind.

87. **However, we are also aware of the constitutional objections, both in the UK and in other countries across the Commonwealth, to the institution of a wholly new category of Commonwealth member. We are currently conducting an inquiry into the foreign policy implications of and for a separate Scotland, and some related issues will be considered during the course of that inquiry. (Recommendation 27, Paragraph 143)**
88. **The main objective of Government policy towards the Overseas Territories on Commonwealth matters is clear; it wishes to strengthen the capacity of the Territories to run their own affairs and thereby to reduce their dependence on the UK and the financial and other liability that they incur. This is a reasonable objective, but it is disappointing that the Government's discussions with the Commonwealth over an enhanced status for Overseas Territories have continued for some time, with no concrete outcome as yet. The FCO should update the Committee on progress on these discussions by the end of December 2012. (Recommendation 28, Paragraph 144)**
89. Enhanced status for the Overseas Territories is not in our gift: any decision to create a new membership status would need to be agreed by consensus of all Commonwealth Heads of Government. In 2007, when this was last considered formally, the Commonwealth Membership Committee came out firmly in favour of retaining only one category of Commonwealth membership, that of a sovereign state as full member. Other member states take the view that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Lord Howell and Mr Swire have raised increasing engagement with the Commonwealth Secretariat, and officials have discussed different categories of membership with other Commonwealth members. The Government has agreed to arrange a tripartite meeting along with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the UK Overseas Territories Association to explore the future relationship between the Commonwealth and the Overseas Territories.
90. The Government is keen to strengthen existing links between the Overseas Territories and the Commonwealth. There is much common ground. Territories already benefit from some Commonwealth programmes and initiatives, and we are working with the Secretariat to explore what more could be done. We welcomed the Secretary-General's attendance at the Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council in December 2012. We continue to ensure that the Overseas Territories are invited to participate in UK delegations at Commonwealth meetings, where possible. We encourage the Commonwealth to invite Overseas Territories and the Crown Dependencies to participate in their conferences, seminars and working groups. Overseas Territories have benefited from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation and are included in regional cross cutting initiatives. We also encourage the Territories to build links with the Commonwealth family of organisations including civil society events, small states conferences, and networks such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Conclusion

91. **We conclude that the Commonwealth benefits from the involvement of the United Kingdom and that the United Kingdom benefits from its membership**

of the Commonwealth. The benefits emerge in many ways, ranging from strong trade and investment links to cultural contacts. Recent profound changes in the balance of global political, diplomatic and economic power have greatly enhanced the prosperity and political influence enjoyed by many Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth clearly could have a bright future. (Recommendation 29, Paragraph 145)

- 92. But we are deeply concerned that, despite all these advantages, the Commonwealth is failing to realise its great potential. In recent years it has been too often both silent and invisible: silent on occasions when members flout its principles, and invisible to its people. Too many of the benefits of the Commonwealth are intangible, as we discovered from our evidence sessions and our visits to Commonwealth countries. (Recommendation 30, Paragraph 146)**
93. The Government agrees that the Commonwealth is an organisation of great value and potential. However, its ability to reach its potential is tempered by a number of factors. The Commonwealth's diversity is undoubtedly one of its strengths, with 54 member states covering all continents. But the same diversity means that there is a wide ranging diversity of opinion within the Commonwealth. In an organisation which reaches decisions on the basis of consensus, this can make it difficult to reach swift, unequivocal decisions. This limits our ability to realise what the Government sees as the Commonwealth's full potential.
94. The Government also believes that, in order to reach the Commonwealth's full potential, the Secretariat should play a much more focussed, proactive and robust role. The Government hopes that the reforms envisaged for the Secretariat in order to deliver the Strategic Plan for 2013-2016 will start to deliver the kind of cultural change in the Secretariat that is required. The Strategic Plan should also be a facilitator in enabling the Secretariat to measure the Commonwealth's success and therefore to identify tangible benefits.
- 95. It is also difficult accurately to measure the benefits of the Commonwealth to its member states including the UK; it is not easy to assess increased influence in the world or to attribute that increase to the Commonwealth rather than to bilateral relationships. We conclude that the FCO's rhetoric about the importance of the Commonwealth is not being matched by its actions. The past closure of diplomatic missions, particularly in the Pacific, cuts to the BBC World Service and changes to the UK visa regime are prime examples. We urge the Government to address this gap between words and deeds. (Recommendation 31, Paragraph 147)**
- 96. We conclude that the Commonwealth must move quickly along the road to reform if it is to make the most of its natural advantages and demonstrate its value to its members. We expect the UK to play a prominent role in this process, and to show that it can match its pro-Commonwealth rhetoric with effective action. If the Commonwealth takes the right decisions in the next few months, we are confident that it can protect and promote its values and**

**benefit the interests of all of its members, including Britain.
(Recommendation 32, Paragraph 148)**

97. The Government has played a prominent role and invested much effort in the Commonwealth modernisation agenda, to ensure that the Commonwealth remains a relevant organisation. It gives, for example, the Secretary-General an enhanced “Good Offices” role. And the Secretariat will have a greater role in supporting an enhanced CMAG. We note with approval that the Secretary-General has started to use his enhanced role to increase his and the Commonwealth’s profile. Since November 2012, the Secretary-General issued five statements on country situations which raise the profile of the organisation and which highlighted the need for member countries to adhere to Commonwealth values. The Government agrees that in recent years the Commonwealth has missed opportunities to stand up for its values. But the Government welcomes signs of increased activity in this area.
98. The Government wants a Commonwealth which is more visible to its people. Too many people only know of the Commonwealth in the context of the Commonwealth Games. And young people in particular do not have enough awareness of, or knowledge about, the Commonwealth. Too often, it is seen from a historical perspective, not as a modern contributor to international relations. The Government welcomes the appointment of a new Head of Communications at the Commonwealth Secretariat and urges the Secretariat to write and implement a strategy to bring the Commonwealth to the attention of its people. But the Government also acknowledges that some work undertaken by the Secretariat is best done in a low-key manner in order to maximise the chances of delivering a positive result.
99. The Government refutes the accusation that there is a gap between the FCO’s words and deeds on the Commonwealth. The Government recognises that we can always do more. The UK through the FCO and other government departments will continue to play a positive and proactive role in the Commonwealth, seeking to deliver UK objectives through the organisation wherever possible. However, there is a common misconception about the extent to which delivery of progress in the Commonwealth is in the UK’s gift alone. In these times of austerity, resources for high competing priorities are already stretched.
100. The Government believes strongly that the Commonwealth is an important institution. This voluntary association of nations is united by its historical ties and also through Her Majesty the Queen, a strong advocate of the Commonwealth. We believe it can become stronger, make the most of its considerable assets, and speak with a louder voice. We will continue to seek to be a positive influence on the organisation, helping to work with it, and through it, to make the Commonwealth more efficient, more focussed and ever more relevant in today’s world.



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