

A Commonwealth of Common Values

E ngā mana, e ngā iwi, e ngā reo. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

It is a pleasure to be here tonight, addressing the Royal Commonwealth Society – so kia ora and thank you for the invitation. There is a strong and long-standing relationship between the British High Commission and the RCS, and I know that I follow in the footsteps of many of my predecessors in addressing you today.

The title of this lecture is ‘A Commonwealth of Common Values’. This has given me a fairly wide remit, which I aim to exploit to the full extent possible!

But before getting into specifics, I would like to set the scene a little.

Members of the Royal Commonwealth Society will be well versed in most of this but I think it well worth revisiting the fundamentals of the Commonwealth, and some key facts and statistics – because they really are quite remarkable.

From an original family of 8 states (including New Zealand) who signed the London Declaration in 1949, the Commonwealth has grown to 53 member states.

Mozambique and Rwanda were the first countries to be admitted to the Commonwealth that were not previously part of the British Empire (you’ll note by my use of the word *first* that we hope there will be more!). We also welcomed Gambia back into the family in February last year, and the Republic of Maldives has requested to re-join. The fact that a growing number of nations are keen to join or re-join the Commonwealth demonstrates the value that countries place on the benefits of being part of our diverse family.

These 53 member states are home to 2.4 billion people – a third of the world’s population, across a quarter of the UN member states. In terms of prosperity, the Commonwealth makes up one-fifth of global trade, with the combined GDP of Commonwealth nations set to reach US\$13 trillion in 2020. Commonwealth States make up a quarter of the G20 group of countries.

The potential of the Commonwealth is therefore vast.

As the current Chair-in-Office, the United Kingdom is working with all member states to ensure the Commonwealth realises that potential. We are focused on promoting democratic values and development, increasing trade, amplifying the voices of small states, and tackling global challenges such as extremism and climate change.

Of course, all of this is easier said than done, and I don’t want to gloss over the challenges that exist with this diverse set of nations. As with any multilateral organisation or any family, different personalities, priorities and inter-family relationships mean that there are tensions and difficulties. I will get into some more detail on these challenges later on. But I think

it's important to acknowledge the role of a common set of values and principles can play in resolving differences – or at the very least provide a basis for a constructive dialogue.

So, with that scene set, I'd like to talk to you about three topics that I think are important to consider when thinking about the Commonwealth and its values:

1. What the common values that bind together this family of diverse nations?
2. What are the challenges that we face?
3. And what does the Commonwealth mean here in New Zealand, in the Pacific and for the UK?

Common Values

The 16 shared values of the nations of the Commonwealth are set out clearly in our Charter. You will be relieved to hear that I will not be going through in detail how each of the 53 nations implement all 16 of those values – we don't have all night, and I am a diplomat, not an anti-insomnia app.

But broadly speaking those Commonwealth values can be summed up as a belief in democracy and the rule of law, good governance and human rights.

The Charter also expresses the commitment of member states to the development of free and democratic societies and the promotion of peace and prosperity to improve the lives of all peoples of the Commonwealth. Our common values, read together, represent our vision of common solutions to common problems, and working within the rules-based international order.

I would like this evening to highlight some of those values that have particular resonance for me, and which I think will have a critical role in how the Commonwealth evolves.

Firstly, human rights and equality

The starting point is that, only if human rights are protected – at an individual and collective level – can a country and its citizens fulfil its true potential. If some people are discriminated against or denied a role in decision making, or if the rule of law is not consistently and predictably applied, then both the people and the nation (and the economy) will suffer.

So it's a no-brainer (to use the technical term) that the Commonwealth is active on human rights. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in the UK last year recognised the importance of sharing human rights best practice and expertise; and agreed to support National Human Rights Institutions in each country, and enable effective participation by Commonwealth states in the Universal Periodic Review process at the Human Rights Council. The UK is – to that end – funding two new Geneva-based advisors, to support Commonwealth member states' engagement with the Universal Periodic Review and the Human Rights Council.

Closer to home, here in the Pacific, the UK and the Secretariat for Pacific

Communities launched the Pacific Commonwealth Equality Project in Kiribati just last month. With £1.8 million of UK funding, this joint initiative will improve the capacity of Pacific Commonwealth countries to deliver on their international human rights commitments. There have been smaller-scale projects, too: in Samoa, for example, the other Commonwealth state to which I am accredited, the Commonwealth Secretariat has supported the critical work of the National Ombudsman in documenting and communicating the problem of domestic violence.

The Commonwealth, in all its diversity, also champions religious freedom. But this year's heinous attacks on mosques in New Zealand and churches in Sri Lanka, and the ongoing persecution of or discrimination against religious minorities in many countries, including Commonwealth countries, remind us – afresh – of our shared responsibility to uphold and protect this fundamental human right to freedom of religion or belief.

Protection of the Environment

As members of the Commonwealth, we share a recognition that we live on a shared planet with finite, common resources that must be managed for the benefit of all. And that we have a duty of kaitiakitanga, or guardianship, for our land and oceans. Here in the Pacific, I don't need to set out the imminent, existential threat that climate change poses to many, eventually all, of our members. I don't need to remind you of the Prime Minister of Tuvalu's rallying cry: that if you save Tuvalu, you save the world. And I don't need – I think – to set out the plight of our oceans and marine life, faced with temperature rises, over-fishing, and pollution.

But it's worth setting out what we are doing to tackle the problem.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting last year, we celebrated the ratification of the Paris Agreement by all members. We re-iterated our commitment to pursue efforts to limit the increase in global average temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. And we launched the Commonwealth Blue Charter to sustainably develop and protect the ocean, along with initiatives such as the Commonwealth Marine Economy Programme, and the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance.

Our task now is to focus on delivery.

Here in the Pacific region, the UK is supporting the establishment of a Regional Pacific Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) Hub in Fiji to help the Pacific Island Countries implement the Paris Agreement. New Zealand announced similar support in the margins of COP 24 in Poland.

In June the UK launched the first ever Pacific Climate Change Report Card on World Oceans Day. In collaboration with UK marine scientists, 60 Pacific Climate Change experts worked to assess the impact of climate change in the region and identify how Pacific islands can respond to this global challenge.

Since its launch with 7 countries in April last year, 25 countries have now signed up to the UK and Vanuatu led "Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance" to

tackle marine plastic pollution. I was at the meeting of the Pacific Community in Noumea in June of this year, and Pacific country after Pacific country set out what they are doing to reduce the use of plastics and tackle plastic pollution. And – as the proud Governor of the Pitcairn Islands, I am pleased to say that they, too, are playing their part, with an expedition to Henderson Island to clear up plastic pollution, study its impact, and communicate the plight of plastic pollution to the world.

None of these problems can be tackled by countries acting alone: we need to co-operate and draw on the contribution and expertise of all our members. And none of them can be tackled by government alone: we need leadership at every level – large states and small, governments and individuals – to deliver the culture change and action necessary.

So, in line with the Charter's principle to recognise the needs of small states, the UK at CHOGM announced a £19m package of support for Small Island Developing States to strengthen pre and post-disaster financing plans, as part of our efforts to support the resilience and prosperity of Small Island Developing States. In November last year, the UK helped to fund Small Island Developing States from across the Commonwealth to attend Kenya's Sustainable Blue Economy Conference, to compare notes on how best to manage oceans sustainably.

And in September, the Prime Minister announced a Young Leaders' Plastic Challenge Badge to help an estimated 100,000 young people in the Commonwealth become leaders in raising awareness about reducing plastic consumption.

Which brings me to the third value I would like to highlight:

The Importance of Young People in the Commonwealth

One in three of all young people aged between 15 and 29 live Commonwealth countries. That's about 640 million young people.

We have all seen the power of young voices leading change – Greta Thunberg is but one example – and I am sure you will agree that our youth are a vital and valuable investment for now and the future.

60% of the population of our member countries are under the age of 30. One of the roles of the Commonwealth is to amplify the voice of young people and for 40 years the Commonwealth Youth Programme has supported member countries to do just that. It places special emphasis on supporting young people to design and drive youth-led initiatives across a range of issues that directly affect them.

A great example of this is the Commonwealth Youth Climate Change Network (CYCN) which was established in 2009 to build the capacity of young people in their endeavours to address climate change and other environmental issues, and advocate on climate change from a youth perspective. The Commonwealth Youth Climate Change Network supports actions that empower young people to translate climate change programmes into effective policies that will have a measurable impact on youth well-being. It also links projects implemented by

its members across the Commonwealth in order to develop common actions and campaigns. For the UK to reach its legally binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to Net Zero by 2050, and for all countries committed to meeting – or exceeding – their Paris commitments, it is key that we engage the drive & ambition of our youth. The Commonwealth provides a great platform for doing so.

A further example is the Commonwealth Children and Youth Disability Network. Launched this year, the network aims to enable young disabled people to effect change on issues that matter to them. This is a practical response to the Commonwealth Heads of Government mandate to ‘address the stigmas around disability in all its forms and manifestations, ensuring that no one is left behind’. This network gives a voice and space to children and young people with disabilities to lead their own agenda in the Commonwealth.

It is also essential to recognise and celebrate the achievements of these young people whose initiatives range from poverty alleviation to peace building. In 2018, Josevata Rotidara (Jo-say-fa-ta Row-ti-fara) from Fiji was a finalist in the Commonwealth Youth Awards in recognition of his inspiring work as an advocate for ‘Campaign for Mental Health’, and his efforts to promote well-being and overcome the stigma that surrounds mental health. The award was won by Usman Iftikhar from Australia, who founded a start up incubator that enables migrants and refugees in Australia to start their own businesses. By showcasing and celebrating the achievements of young people in driving democracy and development, the Youth Awards inspire a whole new generation of Commonwealth leaders.

Challenges

Of course, it’s not all a bed of roses – and it’s worth reflecting on (rather than glossing over) the challenges facing the Commonwealth.

Some of these are about our internal governance – how the large programme budget is spent, or the multiplicity of issues we discuss, and the risk of duplicating discussions in other fora. Over time, the Commonwealth has gained a reputation for being a talking shop. The donor-recipient / north-south dynamic pervades, as can talk of the Old Commonwealth and the New. Controversial decisions, such as allowing Sri Lanka to host CHOGM in 2013 despite concerns about human rights abuses, have fuelled criticism of the organisation and its ability to take decisive action on pressing issues.

More generally, there is a gap between the Commonwealth’s emphasis on human rights, and the reality on the ground in many member states: whether that’s the rights of women or members of the LGBTI community, religious and ethnic minorities, or ensuring a level playing field for political parties. And the Commonwealth’s tools for holding members to account are limited. I was working on South Asia in 2016, when the Republic of the Maldives, tired of being scrutinised and criticised by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group for its failings on human rights, decided to leave the Commonwealth. There are also tensions between members: for example between India and Pakistan, which can complicate the dynamic within the organisation. And the UK is not immune: we are engaged in a long-running dialogue with Mauritius

about the sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory.

But our shared values that we all signed up to in the Commonwealth Charter, and reaffirmed last year, mean that even as we may disagree on specific issues, we are able to continue civil and productive relationships with fellow members. We can also agree – as we did in Malta, and in London – on the need for reform, and work together on that reform. That's how a family of nations works.

And it is a testament to the success of this imperfect family that the Republic of the Maldives, under its new Government, has submitted a request to re-join the Commonwealth.

What does the Commonwealth mean here in New Zealand, in the Pacific and for the UK

I've talked a lot about climate change, oceans and human rights, here in the Pacific region. But I would expect that most Kiwis (current audience probably excepted) would have trouble identifying what benefits New Zealand derives from being a member of the Commonwealth. Explaining what the Commonwealth is and how it benefits its members is an ongoing challenge. There is a low level of understanding of the Commonwealth in all our countries – as any High Commissioner will testify. As the outgoing Indian High Commissioner put it: my Mother wants to know when I'll be promoted to Ambassador...

And yet the tangible benefits of membership are considerable. You may have heard of the 'Commonwealth Advantage'. This is used to describe the fact that trade between Commonwealth members costs on average 19% less than trade with non-members. This is largely thanks to the close relationships and common factors between our countries, such as use of the English language and similar legal and financial systems.

With intra-Commonwealth trade expected to rise to \$700 billion in 2020 and a commitment made by leaders at CHOGM 2018 to raise that to \$2 trillion by 2030 through the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment, there is enormous advantage for a trading nation like New Zealand to be part of the family. Indeed, DPM/FM Peters has established a Commonwealth Trade Envoy, Jeremy Clarke-Watson to ensure that New Zealand is taking maximum advantage of its membership, and to look at how that advantage might be enhanced. Given our similarities of language and legal systems, the Commonwealth is a perfect test-bed to try out exciting, innovative new measures on trade, such as enabling digital trade, finding new ways of addressing regulatory barriers or using trade for development purposes.

But wider than trading links, the Commonwealth is an amazing network of people for New Zealand and the other members to engage with. With 2.4 billion people spread across 53 countries, the Commonwealth encompasses an extraordinarily wide geographic, cultural, ethnic and economic diversity. Normally multilateral fora are focussed on one region or theme, for example, ASEAN and APEC. But the Commonwealth is spread across the globe with the Pacific, African, European, and Caribbean nations meeting to address a diverse set of issues, but all underpinned by this common set of values and

principles.

In no other forum would the Prime Minister of Samoa sit next to the Prime Minister of India, or – I suspect – the Prime Minister of New Zealand next to the Prime Minister of Nigeria.

If you haven't seen the video message that Prime Minister Ardern recorded for Facebook from the tarmac at Heathrow on her way home from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London last year (22 April 2018), it's well worth a watch. You'll see for yourself how enthusiastic she was about the range of leaders she was able to interact with. Leaders that she wouldn't normally have had the chance to speak to. She mentioned conversations with the leaders of Botswana, South Africa, Malta and Sri Lanka.

She spoke about small islands interacting with large states, and in turn persuading them of the scale of the challenge that climate change poses to Island nations. But she also repeatedly used the word potential: and that's right. we have work to do to realise fully the potential of the Commonwealth.

The Pacific

Looking now to the vast Pacific region, here too the connections are close. The Commonwealth and the shared values that I have just described bring us together. Nine Pacific islands are fellow members of the Commonwealth, and our connections – for good or ill – stem from Captain Cook's first voyage through the Pacific 250 years ago this year.

So the UK has long been in and of the Pacific. But in the 2000s we scaled down our presence. We remained present and engaged in Fiji, PNG, and the Solomon Islands. But we closed our High Commissions in Vanuatu and Tonga, and quite frankly we stepped back too much from our Pacific friends and Commonwealth partners in this region.

We are now putting that right. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last year, the then Foreign Secretary, now our Prime Minister Boris Johnson, announced that the UK would be opening 9 new diplomatic missions in Commonwealth countries, thereby increasing the number of British High Commissions around the world from 38 to 47.

Three of those new missions are in the Pacific: we are opening High Commissions in Tonga, Vanuatu and Samoa, thereby doubling our diplomatic presence in the Pacific. And while – on a personal note – I'll be sad to give up my non-resident High Commissioner position to Samoa, it's something that I advocated strongly for, and it's brilliant that we will have a new resident High Commissioner arriving in December.

Because there is so much more we can do together: in the region, and in the Commonwealth as a whole. And we very much hope that the Commonwealth may be coming to the Pacific: at CHOGM 2018, Heads welcomed the offer of Samoa to host CHOGM 2022. A final decision will be made at CHOGM 2020 in Rwanda, but we are excited at the prospect of working with Samoa in this vein, and of course with other countries in the region – New Zealand included.

The UK

And what about the UK? Having got this far without mentioning the B word – I should now talk about what Brexit means – and doesn't mean – in this context.

It's important to stress that, while we are indeed leaving a multinational organisation, the UK is neither nationalist, nor isolationist. We remain proudly multicultural, and proudly internationalist. Some saw Brexit as a sign that the UK would turn in on itself, putting up barriers to international co-operation. But the UK has been clear throughout that it will remain as active and engaged internationally as ever.

We are clear that though we are leaving the EU, we are not leaving Europe: we aim to maintain the closest possible relationships with our European partners, friends and neighbours. We are clear that we believe strongly in global responses to global problems: championing free trade, taking urgent action to protect our climate and oceans, tackling the scourges of terrorism, cyber attacks and hostile states. We are bidding – in partnership with Italy – to host COP 26, the UN Climate Change Conference, in 2020.

We remain focused on human rights and good governance. And we continue to put our money where our mouth is: we are the only NATO member to spend both 2% of GDP on collective defence, and 0.7% on ODA.

We are – in short – re-invigorating our ties with old friends and partners across the globe – and investing time, energy and money, as I have set out, in making the Commonwealth as effective as possible. That's why we were particularly proud to host last year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London last year on the 70th anniversary of our network, and we remain a committed champion of the organisation as Chair-in-Office for this year of 'A Connected Commonwealth'.

Conclusion

To conclude. The UK shaped the world dramatically through colonialism and the British Empire. And our history of Empire – with all the baggage that brings – is also the story of our modern diversity, and British citizens who whakapapa to Commonwealth countries around the world.

Whatever we may think of the Empire and its legacy, and that surely is a topic for another speech on another occasion – the ties that are left are strong. A shared language, shared legal system, shared values. The connections between our peoples – what Prime Minister Modi calls the "living bridge". A feeling of being at home in each others' countries.

That, Ladies in Gentlemen, is now the Commonwealth: a diverse family of nations who, by virtue of those historical, cultural and people to people connections, by virtue of shared values, and by virtue of a shared commitment to finding global solutions to global problems, choose – actively choose – to be part of the Commonwealth.

In May 1949, 70 years ago, Prime Minister Nehru set out why, as it became a

Republic India was committed to being a part of the Commonwealth:

“We join the Commonwealth because we think it is beneficial to us and to certain causes in the world that we wish to advance. It is mutually understood that it is to the advantage of the nations in the Commonwealth and therefore they join. At the same time, it is made perfectly clear that each country is completely free to go its own way... but it is better to keep a co-operative association going which may do good in this world rather than break it.”

And that, Ladies and Gentlemen, remains as true today as it was then: the Commonwealth, in all its imperfection, is beneficial to its members, and it is a force for doing good in the world.

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.