

THE FUTURE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister of Australia, reflects on her experience as a Commonwealth leader, and discusses the future role of the Commonwealth on the global stage, in particular fostering democratic values and countering radicalisation.

The Australia I grew up in was conscious in every way of its connections to the United Kingdom and its status as a Commonwealth country. History classes were largely the study of British history, with a focus on Captain Cook and the ‘discovery’ of Australia. In geography lessons the world was divided into the pink countries – the Commonwealth countries – and the rest of them. During my coming of age the Commonwealth was playing a visible and honorable role in seeking the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa. In 1977, my second last year at school, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, CHOGM, collectively endorsed the first international move in the global campaign to isolate South Africa from world sport. The United Nations boycott followed six months later.

In 1979, my first year at university, the Commonwealth Heads of Government issued the Lusaka Declaration on Racism and Racial Prejudice, the central statement of the Commonwealth’s abhorrence of all forms of racism, including in members’ own societies. In 1986, the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group visited Nelson Mandela in prison and ‘set out the negotiating concept to end apartheid in South Africa peacefully.’

CHOGM 2011 and the Commonwealth Charter

Of the global multilateral events I attended as Prime Minister, CHOGM was the most unusual. It was long – held over three days, including a leaders-only

session that lasted an extraordinary day and a half. And it is large, a gathering of more than 50 nations.

In such an organisation, which is driven by consensus, the risk is drift, particularly if issues are hard to confront. In Perth, I was determined not to allow paralysis to take hold even though the meeting needed to deal with some controversial changes, which were recommended for adoption by an Eminent Persons Group. Progress was made with the adoption of the Group’s proposal for a new Commonwealth Charter. This document now brings together the Commonwealth’s shared values on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It expresses members’ commitment to free and democratic societies and the promotion of peace, and acknowledges the role of civil society in supporting the goals and values of the Commonwealth’s work. In total, thirty recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group were adopted outright without reservation, including a recommendation to develop a strategy for capacity development in small states and another that focused the Commonwealth’s work in respect of climate change on developing island nations. Importantly too, the role of the Ministerial Action Group, was strengthened.

The meeting will also be remembered for an advance in gender equality. Many were already debating what would happen if William and Kate’s first child was a daughter. Could it really be possible that in the decades to come she would be passed over as monarch in favour of a later-born son? Prime Minister David Cameron had decided to fix this for all time, so the eldest child, irrespective of gender, would succeed to the throne.

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What was undiscussed at the meeting was the impact on the Commonwealth of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II coming to an end or, at the very least, her choosing to travel less. I felt though that this was much on her mind at the formal CHOGM dinner. Later, I discovered another possibility, following a meeting with the Queen's Private Secretary. The upshot of the meeting was a clearly worded statement for the public record about how succession works for the role of the Head of the Commonwealth. In the Australian Parliament on 20 March, I duly gave the statement and sent it to all Commonwealth countries. Having had that personal experience with the Commonwealth, from school days to the present day, I feel a sense of connection. As a feminist, I am also delighted to see the election of the first woman to the



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office of Secretary-General and am delighted that she intends to focus on women and girls.

The role of the Commonwealth today

As a very rational global citizen, inevitably my mind turns to the question of whether there is a real role for the Commonwealth today and if so, what it should be. The historic comparative advantages of the Commonwealth have been in reinforcing democratic norms, including by observing elections, anti-racism work and education exchanges.

Certainly the work of democracy-building within Commonwealth countries is not yet done. Of current member nations, troubling records on compliance with democratic norms have forced the suspension from Commonwealth Councils of three: Pakistan, Fiji and Zimbabwe. Indeed, Fiji was fully suspended from the Commonwealth for a period as was Nigeria. Neither is the work of combatting racism and intolerance. Indeed, the challenge of building peaceful, multicultural societies seems as hard now as it has ever been with terrorist attacks inspired by the so-called Islamic State taking lives and heightening fear at the same time as community tolerance is being challenged by record numbers of asylum seekers.

In a world where change happens at warp speed, the educational collaborations sponsored by the Commonwealth are necessary now more than ever. But to be intellectually rigorous we need to ask ourselves the question whether this vital work would continue even if the Commonwealth ceased to exist. After all, the pattern of country connections today in our highly globalised world is no longer defined by the pink parts on the map.

Surely more encompassing global institutions like the United Nations are better placed to act? My answer to this question is a respectful ‘no’.

Put simply, the challenges of our world are so many and multi-faceted that it would be unwise to repudiate an institution that has a capacity

to influence our world for the better. However effective the United Nations is in any particular era, there will always be more problems and issues in our world than it can hope to address. There will be choices, too, on its focus and breadth.

Let us take the issue of election observing, for instance, where the Commonwealth has played such an important historical role. Whilst the United Nations once played a key global role in observing elections it now focuses its role on providing technical assistance. In contrast, the Commonwealth continues to mobilise observation teams of various size, having observed 130 elections in 36 countries since 1980.

In addition, there is always an attraction to fostering international diplomatic space, which can enable the voices of smaller nations to be amplified. As a proud advocate of small states, particularly those that are island states, the Commonwealth has been able to give a louder voice to many who may otherwise get lost on the global stage.

Given the Commonwealth includes 31 small states, it does provide a needed forum for them to engage. And, from time to time, there is still a need for leaders to find some quiet place for collaboration without the immediate presence of any tensions between the world’s two super-powers.

But, whilst I believe the Commonwealth has a future, there is a need for savvy and strategic thinking about its role. The Secretariat is thinly resourced, operating on a budget of just UK£16.14 million in 2012-13, compared to the United Nation’s regular budget that same year being more than US\$5 billion, and it holds leaders’ direct attention only once every two or so years.

What is the Commonwealth’s value-add?

Fostering democratic values

So what should its value-add be? First, I believe that value-add lies in doubling down on one of the Commonwealth’s key traditions: fostering democratic values.

Consider the following words from The Economist magazine: ‘According to The Economist Intelligence Unit’s measure of democracy, one-half of the world’s population now lives in a democracy of some sort. However, in recent years, there has been backsliding on previously attained progress and there has also been a burgeoning of popular disappointment with the fruits of democracy.’ Clearly, the work of the Commonwealth that aims to ensure citizens live in democracies with free and fair elections, stable governing institutions and recourse to the rule of law must continue in order to arrest the backsliding.

But another complex tranche of work beckons for the Commonwealth, namely analysing why



Julia Gillard escorts Queen Elizabeth II, Kamalesh Sharma, and Kamla Persad-Bissessar at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Perth, 2011.

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people in democracies feel let down and finding ways to rebuild trust and faith. Disadvantaged and working class people can be drawn to the siren song of conservative populism because it seems to promise a return to a past, a time before globalisation, technological disruption, visible ethnic diversity within communities and the gender revolution.

Think of the circumstances of unskilled or semi-skilled Western white men. Challenged by economic change, the gender revolution and the migration of

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people, culture and ideas, every reality they thought they could rely on has given way under them. Anger is an understandable response. An easy target for that rage is the mainstream political class, who preach about the inevitability of globalisation, the need for more modernisation, the requirement to respect diversity, all while leading seemingly pampered lives. How easy is it to conclude that these besuited men and women are out of touch?

My suggestion is the Commonwealth could burnish its contemporary relevance by fostering a search for the answers, a thorough debate about governing while globalising and democracy strengthening in today's world. It could be, in this time of global change, an ideas exchange, a power house capable of collecting, furthering and disseminating the best of thinking available globally on how democracies can best prosper in today's worlds. This would capture the attention of political leaders, including those in mature democracies who are very likely to question whether CHOGM is worth three days of their time. But the work would have broad and powerful implications for our world.

Countering radicalisation

Second, the Commonwealth could build on its traditional strength of combatting racism by focusing its convening, research and education dialogue on the vexed question of countering radicalisation. In Australia there is a sense of fear and puzzlement as we witness the spectacle of young people becoming radicalised and as a result joining the fighting in Syria or Iraq or planning attacks at home. What seems

truly beyond comprehension is that some of these young people grew up in Australia, surfing and skate boarding, with no strong attachment to religion. In the search for answers to the profoundly troubling phenomenon of radicalisation, the Commonwealth is already employing its convening power. At its last meeting in Malta in 2015, CHOGM specifically discussed the fight against radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism, and condemned the terrorism and violence of extremist groups.

CHOGM agreed that these threats need to be countered through national, regional and international action, and that it was “imperative to counter the use of the internet by extremist groups to radicalise and recruit fighters”. Real, practical steps have ensued. CHOGM 2015 welcomed the newly established Commonwealth Countering Violent Extremism Unit, which has been given a mandate to “advance the Commonwealth's role in international efforts to counter extremism, especially through civil society networks and education”. The new Unit will do so, in part, by seeking to tackle the online dissemination of materials that promote extremist ideologies and by countering the narratives contained in such propaganda if it does get into circulation.

I am very pleased that the Australian Government committed \$2.5 million towards funding this unit and that the UK Government will be contributing £5 million. But as great as this progress is, there is so much more to do in an area where currently, as a global community, we are only just scratching the surface. What's needed now is better research, so that we can better understand what we do not yet know about radicalisation and violent extremism.

As radicalisation expert, and newly elected Australian MP, Anne Aly explains: “there is no singular profile to explain who becomes a violent extremist and why. Most theories or models of radicalisation concur that it is a process, not necessarily linear, by which an individual progresses through a mild interest in a political, social or ideological cause to accepting the use of violence as a valid means of furthering that cause.” Fully understanding the process of radicalisation requires a better understanding of the complex and varied factors that cause it. To Aly, these factors include “individual psychology, personal and group identity, demographics, individual circumstances and contact with radicalising settings or influences, including personal contact with recruiters or influential people.”

Education, which is my primary focus, also plays an important role. We know that for each additional year of school a teenage boy undertakes, his risk of becoming involved in conflict reduces by 20 per cent. This is partly because of the economic benefits of education, and partly because of the

role education can play in social cohesion and national identity. A lack of education can lead to “political disempowerment and regression to group allegiances”. Yet, when education is combined with a curriculum that promotes tolerance and social cohesion, as well as an environment where there are opportunities for youth employment, the risks of young people becoming involved in extremist activities may be reduced. Of course, education can be used to manipulate – to promote conflict and extremism, and to exacerbate differences. But the reverse also stands true. If done well, education can play an important role in countering radical influences and promoting peace building.

But there is still a need for better research that will help us understand why radicalisation occurs amongst young people, and what role schools, teachers and broader education systems can play in countering these factors. Further, we must fully digest and acknowledge the impact a lack of education can have on an individual’s capacity for tolerance and susceptibility to extremist ideologies. One of the things I am doing during my time as a Visiting Professor with the Policy Institute at King’s College is looking at ways to marry up the research in both education and countering violent extremism, as well as connecting with researchers, practitioners and policy makers working independently in these spaces. It is in this critical area of further research that I believe the Commonwealth has a considerable contribution to make. The Commonwealth embraces people from all faiths, from the Anglicans of the United Kingdom, to the Muslims of Malaysia and the Hindus of India. That is a strength that can be leveraged in order to enable deeper analysis and a search for solutions.

Many of its member countries have already felt the harsh realities of failing to counter extremist

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ideologies before they lead to violent acts. They know what is at stake and have direct experience we can learn from.

The Commonwealth is a proven forum for tackling extreme ideologies: just look at how influential it was in promoting the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.

And given that 60 per cent of the Commonwealth Countries’ combined population of more than 2 billion people is made up of those under 30 years of age, the Commonwealth is uniquely placed to collate and assess heart of the data on this issue.

My hopes for the Commonwealth

As a child of Wales but a citizen of Australia, a supporter of my nation becoming a Republic and as someone who led a progressive Government, my optimism about the future of the Commonwealth may surprise you. Yet whatever we hope for the future, we cannot disentangle ourselves from the rich woven history of our past. In this modern era, the Commonwealth faces new challenges in breadth and relevance but it also has an impressive legacy that we should preserve and honour. The Commonwealth can and should play a powerful role on the global stage, and there are a number of states – particularly small states – that will depend on its advocacy.

As an ideas exchange and intellectual powerhouse on globalisation, governing and democracy strengthening, the Commonwealth can both build on its traditional role as a champion of democratic ideals whilst preserving these values in times of change, fear and division.

As a thought leader on issues of countering violent extremism, the Commonwealth could play an essential role in tackling the dissemination of information and ideologies that challenge our community safety, that create a more instable world and that can take our children from us and radicalise them for the most evil of purposes.

These are my hopes for our Commonwealth.

This article is based on a speech made by the Hon Julia Gillard delivered at King’s College, London, UK, on 5 October 2016.

Julia Gillard, the 27th Prime Minister of Australia, is the first woman to ever serve as Australia’s Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister. Ms Gillard is now chair of the Global Partnership for Education, a leading organisation dedicated to expanding access and quality education worldwide. Ms Gillard is a non-resident Distinguished Senior Fellow with the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution in Washington.