

Commonwealth Service 22nd April 2018
they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (Hebrews 11)
Towards a common future

At Christmas, in 1953, Her Majesty the Queen was in New Zealand. With the Duke of Edinburgh, she had just completed the first month of what would be a six month tour of the Commonwealth - 40,000 miles, thirteen countries. Her Christmas Broadcast came from Government House in Auckland. She spoke briefly about all the ambition and aspiration that surrounded a new monarch, all that talk of a new *Elizabethan Age*. She was not persuaded,

Frankly I do not myself feel at all like my great Tudor forbear... who ruled as a despot and was never able to leave her native shores

The Queen was not ambitious for herself, or for the monarchy. She was ambitious for the Commonwealth; *this great Commonwealth*, she called it. She has been and she still is *the* apologist for the Commonwealth. She told her listeners the Commonwealth is

built on the highest qualities... friendship, loyalty ... the desire for freedom and peace

Then, at the end of her broadcast, the tone changed. The Queen spoke directly to the people of New Zealand. They had woken on Christmas morning to the news that, overnight, the Wellington–Auckland express had plunged into a flooded river. One hundred and fifty-one people had been killed. Her message of hope was delivered in the midst of tragedy. She spoke of the future, but she acknowledged that the present is awkward and anguished.

If you are hopeful; if your hope is going to be real, you have to be relevant. Hope will never get us to *there* if it does not start from *here*. Do you know about John Sedgwick general of the Union army at the battle at Spotsylvania Courthouse in the American Civil War? He berated his troops as they hid from sniper fire. “I am ashamed of you. They couldn’t hit an elephant at this distance.” It was the last thing he said, a sniper shot him. You have to get the facts right.

Celebrating the Commonwealth, we need to say something about our hope and we need to get the facts straight. When the Queen made that Christmas broadcast in 1953 she spoke about the *empire*. Our Commonwealth emerged from empire. If we are going to get the facts straight, empire into Commonwealth is a tricky transition.

Let me introduce you to Hatuey, a chief, a cacique, from Hispaniola, the island we know as the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In 1511 he fought Diego Velazquez in Cuba. He showed the local people a basket of jewels

Here is the God the Spaniards worship. For these they fight and kill... They tell us, these tyrants, that they adore a God of peace and equality, and yet they usurp our land and make us their slaves. They speak to us of an immortal soul ... and yet they rob our belongings and violate our daughters

Hatuey died at the stake refusing baptism. He said he did not want the reward of heaven if heaven was going to be full of Spaniards. Hatuey knew that a future hope does not excuse

cruelty and oppression. Vague promises for the future do us no good, we need to know what is happening now.

This is perhaps a slightly tougher sermon than you might have been expecting. I am telling you about hope and reality, about empire and commonwealth because there is a debate about the commonwealth. We will do ourselves no favours if we ignore it. On Thursday, Philip Murphy published a new book, *The Empire's New Clothes*. I have not had time to read it, but I have read other things by Professor Murphy. He speaks with authority, he is the Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. He is also, allegedly, 'mercurial, maverick and mischievous'. Murphy is a critic of the Commonwealth. His new book has been described as 'a brilliant demolition of the myth of commonwealth and of the power of imperial nostalgia'.

The reality is painful. We know that. This week the papers have been full of the shameful experience of the Windrush generation. These, remember, are children of the Commonwealth. The British Government failed them. We failed them; the Commonwealth failed them. If we have aspirations for the Commonwealth - and we are here today because we do - we have to start with the reality. The reality is that the transition from empire was awkward. The reality is that privilege and economic power still disturbs the vision of equality that the Commonwealth declares. There is something hollow about the way the champions of Brexit talked up the Commonwealth. Some of them are the very people who oppose immigration and integration.

If we are going to hope, and we should, we need to acknowledge it is a long way from here to there. There is work to do if we are to come to terms with the past and really think about the future. In Bristol, of all places, we must acknowledge that.

So if we are going to hope, let's hope properly, let's hope with ambition and imagination. I have been reading the Commonwealth Strategic Plan. I have to tell you it doesn't really make the heart beat faster. Listen to this,

The Commonwealth ... must ...enhance efforts for consensus building... The outcomes matrix will be developed into a Strategic Results Framework (SRF) after the approval of the Strategic Plan

That is not hope. Hope never promises us just another committee and a *framework*.

Let's think again. The Commonwealth has 53 member countries. Its newest members, Rwanda and Mozambique, have no historic ties to the British Empire. The Commonwealth is open and generous. On a map, the Commonwealth is equivalent to 20% of the world's land area. It spans all six inhabited continents. It has an estimated population of very nearly two and a half billion, nearly a third of the world population. It is a world community and members all have an equal say. Nations like India and Nigeria and islands like Vanuatu - or Tuvalu with a population of just 10,000 – meet as equals. There is no legal obligation, just shared aspiration. More than half of the citizens of the Commonwealth are under the age of 30. It has a *future*.

Once you get past the gobbledygook of the *outcomes matrix*, here is a commitment to access to justice, to free elections, to opposing the abuse of women, to improving education, to tolerance, and respect.

This is indeed the hope we need. We *really* need a community of nations that knows about injustice, inequality, poverty, and tyranny. A community that can tell the truth about such things and hope for better and work for better. The rhetoric of nations is littered with untruth and with posturing; tweets, and the online mills that grind out lies. The Commonwealth is a place where relationship is precious and where we can and should tell the truth. Politics is about power, but the Commonwealth is built on no obligation whatsoever. Diplomacy is all about ambition and risk, in the Commonwealth it is hope that counts. Not a strategic plan but the language our Queen might use, community, equality, justice.

We are here to celebrate something infinitely precious. The Commonwealth should command our respect and our hope. We know the reality, we stare out over the wreckage of Syria, we listen to the half truths of the powers and too often we hear blame when we should hear apologies when we confront our own injustice. The Commonwealth offers that different hope, but if it is to mean anything must be a hope about where we are and how far there is to go.

We heard a reading about what faith can endure

time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword ... destitute, persecuted, tormented—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy.

That was realism, the story of where we are, what has gone wrong. And yet, there was still hope; the hope of what we can be together. That is the point. Common action is our answer. We will turn this around together or not at all. The Commonwealth is that hope, of shared action, shared commitment, shared belief. It tells us what we might become. It is the good we long for. It is the hope we should have, but it begins in us telling the truth about where we are and it begins with us making a commitment to be better than we are.