

The Commonwealth: some reflections from personal experience

Address by Professor Don Markwell, Head of St Mark's College, Adelaide,

to the Christmas Dinner of the South Australian branches of the Royal Commonwealth Society and the English-Speaking Union,

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It's an enormous pleasure to be with you tonight for this combined Christmas Dinner of the South Australian branches of the Royal Commonwealth Society and the English-Speaking Union – together with some other members of the Joint Commonwealth Society group.

Although I am a relative newcomer to South Australia, having had the great pleasure of living here for just over a year, my links with the Royal Commonwealth Society and the ESU in fact go back many years.

For a number of years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I frequently worked in the old Royal Commonwealth Society building in Northumberland Avenue, just off Trafalgar Square in London, when I served as Secretary of the Round Table – the group that, for over a century, has published the Commonwealth journal of international affairs of that name, *The Round Table*.

During my years as Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford, from 2009 to 2012, I also served as the entirely nominal president of the Oxfordshire branch of the English-Speaking Union, and I confess that I added little, if anything, to their activities.

I mention all of this to say that I am delighted to be with you, and that I really feel that I am among friends. Thank you for your kind invitation and your warm welcome.

It seems to me that part, at least, of what unites us all is a keen interest in promoting international understanding, with a strong focus on the English-speaking world and, particularly, the Commonwealth.

Before continuing, I would like to pay a tribute to an Australian scholar of the Commonwealth, Mary Bull, who passed away in England on Tuesday (1 December), at the age of 90. As a young Australian woman who came to England in the 1950s, Mary worked with a great Commonwealth scholar, Dame Margery Perham, a historian principally of colonial West Africa, though she

wrote on other topics also, including the Pacific. Mary maintained her interest in African, Australian, and other Commonwealth affairs for the rest of her life.

Mary Bull is also renowned to countless students of international relations as the widow of the great Australian scholar, Hedley Bull, who died in 1985 while professor of international relations in Oxford, and who remains revered as an analyst of the nature of order in the international society of states. Over many decades, Mary Bull gave warm hospitality to many Australians and others in Oxford, and I am amongst many who remain deeply grateful to her.

At the risk of seeming excessively self-referential, I thought that it might be of some interest to discuss tonight how the Commonwealth has featured in my own life, and what this illustrates about aspects of the modern Commonwealth, and the importance of understanding and promoting it.

In believing that the Commonwealth is important, of course, none of us believes that other associations of nations and peoples are not important, or that other means of promoting international understanding are not important. Of course they are.

In my own case, one of the highlights of my career was working with Julie Bishop in the year before she became Foreign Minister in 2013 to develop the policy design for the New Colombo Plan – sometimes referred to as the reverse Colombo Plan – that since 2014 has taken literally tens of thousands of Australian undergraduates to study abroad, and in many cases undertake work internships, in the countries of the Indo-Pacific region. The goals include to develop strong people-to-people links between Australia and our neighbours – from Pakistan in the west to Pacific islands in the east, and north to China, South Korea, and Japan.

The idea that educational exchanges – movements of students between countries – can promote international understanding and contribute to more harmonious international relations, even to promote peace, is a powerful idea that in the last century and more has owed much to the powerful example that Cecil Rhodes set with the creation of the Rhodes Scholarships. Rhodes quite explicitly set out to promote peace. In a codicil to his will that, in 1901, laid the basis for the creation of Rhodes Scholarships for Germany – to go with those he had already envisaged for much of the then British Empire and for the United States – he wrote: “The object is that an understanding between the three great powers [the British Empire, the United States, and Germany] will render war impossible and educational relations make the strongest tie.” Rhodes wanted to prevent the First World War.

Although obviously he failed in that goal, the idea that educational ties could promote international understanding and even peace has remained strong, and been reflected in many subsequent scholarship and student mobility programs, from the American Fulbright program to the Commonwealth Scholarships to many others, including, in recent years, Australia's own New Colombo Plan.

Before I come back to this, perhaps you will indulge me if I refer to some other episodes in my life that have, for me, highlighted the importance of the Commonwealth.

The first of these is that I came, as someone keenly interested in Australian constitutional issues in the 1970s and 1980s, to understand that you can only understand the Australian Constitution in the context of the constitutional practices of systems which, like our own, owe so much to Westminster. If the authors of the Australian Constitution adopted some elements from Washington – federalism and equal representation of the States in a powerful Senate, for example – they also adopted much from Westminster – government responsible to Parliament, a constitutional monarchy, and the crucial role of unwritten but binding constitutional rules we refer to as constitutional conventions.

Although as a boy I was interested in, for example, how the Prime Ministership was filled following the death of Harold Holt in 1967, I first started to think about this seriously when difficult and divisive issues arose in 1975 – with the unusual filling of casual Senate vacancies, the Senate denial of Supply unless there was an election for the House of Representatives, the Prime Minister's refusal to call such an election, and the Governor-General's dismissal of the Prime Minister and appointment of a caretaker Prime Minister to advise the dissolution of both Houses of Parliament and the calling of an election.

The more I studied these issues and other Australian constitutional issues, the clearer it was to me that one needed to understand experience and approaches in Britain and other parts of the Commonwealth – especially but not only Canada and New Zealand – if one was to understand our own Constitution. This should hardly be surprising, given that the authors of our Constitution had such understanding themselves, and regarded the Constitution they wrote as founded in significant part on conventions of Westminster parliamentary systems.

Perhaps unsurprisingly also, for many decades the most important works on the reserve powers of the Crown included works by an Australian – Dr H V Evatt's *The King and His Dominion Governors* – and a Canadian, Dr Eugene

Forsey's *The Royal Power of Dissolution of Parliament in the British Commonwealth*. In 1985, when briefly in Ottawa, I was fortunate to be one of Dr Forsey's two guests when he was installed by the Governor-General of Canada, Madame Sauvé, as a Privy Councillor – one of Canada's highest honours.

More recently, my 2016 book entitled *Constitutional Conventions and the Headship of State: Australian Experience* – with, as I discover, 35 entries on the Commonwealth in the index to that book - reflects the fact that the evolution of the Commonwealth and practice in other Commonwealth countries are important, in fact essential, contexts for understanding our own Constitution. This would, in my view, remain the case if Australia were to become a republic.

In July this year, the publication, after a High Court decision, of Sir John Kerr's correspondence with Buckingham Palace before, during, and after the 1975 constitutional crisis has again focussed attention on these topics – and, not least, on whether communications between the Queen and her representatives in the many countries of which she is Queen should be treated as private and confidential, or as an important part of the public record of that country. I, for one, am glad the correspondence has been made public.

In the 1980s, simultaneously with taking a keen interest in constitutional issues in Australia and some other Commonwealth countries, I was engaged in the academic study in Oxford of international relations. On the one hand, I was engaging with those who saw the Commonwealth as an important means of advancing important goals. This, after all, was in the optimistic aftermath of the Commonwealth's role in turning white-governed Rhodesia to majority-rule Zimbabwe, before the Mugabe regime turned to catastrophic dictatorship. It was also during the period when, Mrs Thatcher aside, Commonwealth leaders were actively cooperating to try to bring apartheid in South Africa to an end. The Commonwealth under Secretary-General Sir Shridath Ramphal seemed a pivotal actor on this and other issues. Sonny Ramphal encouraged us all to see the Commonwealth as a precious legacy from an imperfect past with a vital role to play for the future.

On the other hand, my academic study of international relations was significantly at the feet of the great Australian scholar of international relations whom I have already mentioned, Hedley Bull, who until his death in 1985 was professor of international relations in Oxford. In 1959, Hedley Bull had written an article called "What is the Commonwealth?" which argued that the Commonwealth was really an organisation of little substance or power, and he seemed to maintain that view. While I saw that so much of international

politics is unavoidably about hard realities of power, I nonetheless believed that the Commonwealth – as an association of nations and to some extent of peoples – could nonetheless be an element in international politics that could promote more rather than less order, understanding, and cooperation: and in a world of conflict, anything that promoted these things in positive ways was to be encouraged.

This led on to my being asked to become, in 1988, the Secretary of the Round Table, to which I have already briefly referred. The Round Table is a group, based in London, that since 1909 has published a Commonwealth-focused journal of international affairs, called *The Round Table*. As Secretary, it was my job to organise the quarterly dinner meetings of the editorial committee – known as the Moot – usually with a guest speaker of significance on a Commonwealth topic, as well as occasional international conferences on Commonwealth-related topics.

In this way, I learnt more of the practical forms of cooperation within the Commonwealth, including, for example, in the promotion of democracy, educational cooperation, development finance both public and private, environmental protection, and more. I sat at the feet of people with great experience in Commonwealth matters, including those who worked at the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation, the now-threatened Institute for Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, groups such as the Commonwealth Journalists Association, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and more.

It was no doubt in part arising from this experience that in 1995, I was asked by the then Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Emeka Anyaoku, to serve on a body he was creating to consider and make recommendations about the study of the Commonwealth in Commonwealth countries. Chaired by a great Canadian, Professor Thomas H B Symons, this Commission on Commonwealth Studies brought together scholars and practitioners from the various regions of the Commonwealth to consider the value and strength of studying the Commonwealth.

Our report was entitled *Learning from Each Other*, and it emphasised the importance, not only of understanding the modern Commonwealth as an association of nations, but of how in diverse fields people in each Commonwealth country could learn from studying issues and experience in other Commonwealth countries. Constitutional issues, to which I have already referred, is one example. There are many others. For all their diversity,

Commonwealth countries have enough in common for us to learn a great deal from each other's experience – for example, in how we organise our education systems and institutions, how we organise our health systems, how we run our elections and our parliaments and our government departments, and much more besides.

In 1997, I was asked to help present our report to the Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers in Botswana, which endorsed its call for increased focus on Commonwealth studies, as did the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings – CHOGMs – in Auckland in 1995 and in Edinburgh in 1997.

Nearly 25 years on, a few weeks ago, the surviving members of the Commission on Commonwealth Studies had a reunion of sorts – an unhappy one, I'm sorry to say - when we agreed by email all to sign joint letters to the British Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Affairs and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of London to protest the planned closure of the famous Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London, long perhaps the most important powerhouse of Commonwealth Studies on the planet. That this closure should be contemplated at a time when Brexit Britain needs the Commonwealth more than it has for many decades seems short-sighted and self-destructive, to say the least.

Education, as I have already suggested, is one area in which Commonwealth countries have much in common and can learn from each other. I have devoted a good deal of my career to university colleges – including as a Fellow of three Oxford colleges, and as the head of now three Australian colleges. Although the residential academic communities we know as colleges are found in non-Commonwealth countries – for example, in certain forms in leading American institutions – the collegiate ideal of university education has had its greatest flowering in the United Kingdom, especially at Oxford and Cambridge, and this ideal has been transmitted to many Commonwealth countries, conspicuously including here in Australia.

It is unsurprising that the founders of St Mark's College here in Adelaide – of which there is at least one alumnus here tonight – were largely graduates of Oxford and Cambridge, and knew the great benefits for students of living and learning together in a college – benefits, I might say, which are as great today as they ever were. Indeed, the pandemic, in limiting normal activities, has highlighted how much people need the community and the connectedness which college life brings.

I was struck some years ago by the discovery of how influential in the development of the college ideal in Australia many Rhodes Scholars have been. But perhaps it is little wonder that people, such as Rhodes Scholars, who have experienced the great benefits to students of college life in Oxford should be passionate about providing comparable opportunities for students in Australia.

This brings us back to almost where I started this evening: the purposes of the Rhodes Scholarships. I mentioned that one of Cecil Rhodes's principal goals was the promotion of international understanding and peace. The other was the promotion of what we might call public-spirited leadership. He wanted young people of excellence in intellect, character, leadership and service to, in a phrase he used, fight "the world's fight".

Now Cecil Rhodes, of course, is a hugely controversial figure, widely condemned as a racist and an imperialist: which of course he was. But I nonetheless believe that the scholarships he endowed have put ill-gotten resources to exceptionally good use, as a profoundly positive force in the lives of many exceptional young people and, through them, to the benefit of the communities they serve.

It was thus for me impossible to resist the call in 2009 – in the depths of the Global Financial Crisis – to become Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford. In that role, at a time when the Rhodes Trust faced a genuine financial disaster, it was necessary to work as hard as I have ever worked to strengthen the financial viability of the Rhodes Trust and to secure the Rhodes Scholarships for the future – a goal which has been achieved.

The Rhodes Scholarships bring together students of all races and of all faiths and none. This is one of the ways in which they help to promote understanding between peoples of diverse backgrounds.

The Commonwealth also, of course, brings together people of all races and of all faiths and none. This is one of the ways in which, however limited and imperfect, it too remains a force for good in a divided world that sorely needs to promote international, inter-cultural, and inter-faith understanding.

I conclude by mentioning that we are at this moment hurtling towards Christmas, and this creates for some people a conundrum – a conundrum about whether to say "Merry Christmas" or what is said to be the more inclusive "Happy Holidays".

Rather remarkably, the Head of the Commonwealth – the Queen – is within the United Kingdom formally also Defender of the Faith. Her standing as a unifier among people of all faiths and none around the Commonwealth seems

undiminished by that role, or by her making annual Christmas messages which do not disguise her Christian faith.

In closing, therefore, I take comfort from her example not only to wish you “Happy Holidays”, but also – more bravely – to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.