

Franco-British Council

The Commonwealth and La Francophonie: *roles for the future*

Report of a seminar

at the Fondation Singer-Polignac, Paris

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The Commonwealth and La Francophonie: roles for the future

INTRODUCTION

The gathering pace of globalisation and the fact that about 60 per cent of the world's population - chiefly concentrated in developing countries - is below the age of 25 lend urgency to the debate about the future roles of the Commonwealth and la Francophonie. Identities are at stake at the local and the international levels. Globalisation carries the risk of standardisation and it may erode or even extinguish multiculturalism. And unless the values of each organisation are transmitted dynamically to the next generation, the outlook for these international ensembles is bleak.

Two themes recurred throughout the day: the bonds of language and the shared goals of la Francophonie and the Commonwealth. A kaleidoscope of views was presented without discussion. This was unavoidable if all the nominated speakers were to be accommodated. Even so, time constraints meant that speakers in the afternoon session had to pare back their contributions. Participants were encouraged to consult the full printed texts that were available. A mosaic of practical proposals and recommendations was also offered in the course of the day, listed separately (see Proposals on pages 11-12).

INTERVENTIONS

Speakers were unanimous that the dialogue between the Francophone and Anglophone international ensembles was of great importance. The seminar structure, with simultaneous interpretation in French and English, seemed apt since 'in their own language people say what they want to say rather than what they know how to say'. La Francophonie and the Commonwealth were described as international groupings around languages, with members in common that included Canada, Mauritius, Vanuatu, St Lucia, Cameroun, Dominica, and Seychelles. The existence of both organisations illustrated the will to build an international society that was less schematic than the UN.

La Francophonie and the Commonwealth shared a special responsibility in regard to Africa. France and Britain had left behind their languages - universal languages - on the African continent, where the African languages were so numerous and so disparate. 'In the ruins of decolonisation, we have found a wonderful tool - the French language' one speaker declared (reportedly quoting Camus). The French language is also now a treasure available on the internet and the French vocabulary of Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and so on offered a plurality of norms enhancing its vitality. Similarly, the English language that linked the Commonwealth was of inestimable value and it had the advantage that it was enjoyed without the presence of a superpower within the Commonwealth.

Several speakers contrasted the origins of the two groupings. One speaker pursued a ruthlessly etymological approach, pointing out that the term Francophonie appeared in 1880 whereas Commonwealth was first mentioned at a conference in Adelaide in 1884. Both organisations were born in a post-colonial era but their births differed in important respects.

In the case of the Commonwealth, self-government of newly independent countries became a recognised goal - as in the case of India. The experience of la Francophonie had been different. La Francophonie was not born out of a decision by newly independent countries to retain links with France but rather out of the failure of independence of sub-Saharan countries. The Commonwealth's experience during the 1930s resembled la Francophonie's experience during the 1960s. So their historical contexts were comparable but dissimilar.

Another significant difference was the area of intervention of the two organisations. La Francophonie still saw its role as primarily strengthening language ties, the Commonwealth instead emphasising economic and social development. Each was challenged to improve its visibility and to control globalisation while promoting democracy.

Relations between the two organisations had been formalised by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on January 26, 1992 (amended in 1999). The agreement provides a framework for co-operation that has led to collaboration in several areas. This had included close co-operation during the parliamentary elections in Cameroun in May 1997; a joint observer group for the March 1998 elections in the Seychelles; a seminar to analyse the multilateral trade implications of the Cotonou agreement in Geneva in November 2000; a colloquium on constructive pluralism in Yaoundé, Cameroun in January 2000; and collaboration with the Francophone observer group during the Seychelles presidential elections in 2001.

Solidarity, notably with southern states, was also characteristic of the two large ensembles, as were conflict resolution, peace keeping and peace building in Africa. So was a mission to promote constructive cultural diversity - multiculturalism - as a philosophy. This mission was seen as vital in a globalising environment as 'human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe'. The terrorist assault on New York on 11 September, 2001 had underscored this.

A few misconceptions were to be set aside at the outset. First, the perception that the Commonwealth was 'much heavier' or more influential or that the two organisations were in any sense rivals. Each resembles the other in terms of institutional structures. They pursue similar objectives and are clearly converging.

The Commonwealth and la Francophonie are approximately of the 'same weight' - the Commonwealth comprising 54 countries or 1.8 billion people, la Francophonie comprising 55 member countries with 600 million people. A crucial similarity

concerns trade: la Francophonie accounts for 17 per cent of world trade, the Commonwealth for 20 per cent. Both organisations are forward looking since ‘the strength and lure of the future is greater than the weight of tradition for both’. Protection of the planet, elimination of poverty and building understanding between cultures were selected for special mention in this shared work. The Harare Declaration (1991) and the Bamako Declaration (2000) - the latter unique in the history of la Francophonie - were seen as kindred inspirational documents or ‘normative texts’.

La Francophonie’s adoption of the Bamako Declaration in November 2000 regarding democracy, rights and freedoms was an attempt to deepen democracy for the purposes of development – a qualitative change in its self-declared role. There was a need to implement the Bamako Declaration in order to encourage ‘the democratisation of human rights’ throughout la Francophonie.

The risks that were run by the two organisations were also similar. Broadly, these were a tightening of the international stance of the EU so that the UK would no longer be a free agent in its dealings with the Commonwealth. This risk attached also to France in la Francophonie. Another risk was that there might be so little investment in the Commonwealth – politically, financially, and in terms of public awareness – that it became incapable of doing anything significant. Finally, there was the risk that there would be so little knowledge of what the Commonwealth is, has done and could do that political and opinion leaders simply would not think of it as a network for responding to such challenges as sustainable development, the AIDS pandemic, and the need for UN reform (for example). It was to be inferred that la Francophonie’s predicament was very similar.

The roles and impacts of unofficial networks within both organisations were emphasised. Commonwealth NGOs had a unique role as outriders of civil society, not least the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative. It was through groups like these that the people of Commonwealth countries were becoming more closely involved with and aware of the values and traditions they share - respect for the rule of law, cultural diversity and equality. The Commonwealth of Learning for example is literally touching the lives of millions of mainly younger citizens of the Commonwealth. It does this by its emphasis on open schooling, especially to improve access to education for girls and women, technical/vocational education and training, continuing and professional education, and teacher education. The COL’s development of distance learning had been appreciated especially by the Caribbean, South Africa and India.

It was pointed out that the Commonwealth must recognise itself as an association of developed and developing countries in which poverty is a serious problem. It also needs to act decisively to free very many countries from their debt burdens so they can use their own limited resources to address their own problems. Women still account for only seven per cent of parliamentarians in Commonwealth countries. Increasing women’s participation in politics and decision-making is essential to

achieve good governance and democracy. More than 75 million school-aged children in the Commonwealth lack access to education. Two thirds of these are girls.

One speaker drew attention to a shift in the role of la Francophonie. The APF (Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie) assembly born in Strasbourg restricted its activities to French language and culture but the assembly no longer restricts itself in this way. The APF is more integrated in the political apparatus of la Francophonie than is its sister organisation in the Commonwealth. It is a thinking forum and an action forum - its recommendations are transmitted to the political bodies. The purpose of the APF is to accept text - 64 parliaments participate. The APF may be called a parliamentary democracy.

It is an APF principle that even if the majority rules in parliament, the opposition must have a voice. It has a federal aspect and links reflection and action – upon, for instance, the AIDS pandemic, cultural heritage, and the impact of wars on children. Finally, APF brings material help to other entities, such as setting up libraries. Several African parliaments have been helped to set up websites and to take reliable minutes. Awareness raising amongst youth is also part of its work.

A plethora of prescriptions and blueprints had caused confusion about the place and value of the Commonwealth and la Francophonie. The Francophonie is a way of thinking and acting. It is a spiritual and intellectual community, fostering understanding across cultural borders. It was necessary now to look beyond the rhetoric at the target constituencies and to ask ‘How do we ensure stability in our civil societies? How do we protect ourselves against corruption high and low and against terrorism?’

Influence is at its best when it stimulates the desire to imitate a role model. Teachers - i.e. la Francophonie and the Commonwealth - are best regarded as friends and role models. The important goal was ‘to gain insight into people’s psyches and mind-sets to attain solidarity in our communities.’ There was also a need to institutionalise best practice. Together the two organisations were a force for democracy and good governance and a platform for help towards self-sustaining development. NGOs working with youth, women and disabled people had a crucial part to play.

It was only prudent to make youth central to the plans and vision of both la Francophonie and the Commonwealth since the future belongs to youth. In this connection the Commonwealth Institute’s Common Ground was an encouraging development: a planned network to educate, entertain and to encourage innovation, to learn about other cultures, human rights and good citizenship.

Africa and the rule of law

Law was seen as a particular challenge. It was common to hear people say that the southern countries are shipwrecked; that justice is in crisis there.

Magistrates and judges in southern countries are often criticised. This situation challenges la Francophonie, whose political identity followed its linguistic identity. Africa is a great source of wealth and a great source of problems and dramas. (This formula could indeed be extended to all the countries that were placed under the rule of the two ensembles.)

In Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia there was a need to agree on a *modus operandi*. La Francophonie tries to equip, renovate or refund justice. In this regard dissemination of doctrine was important; without it there can be no rule of law and the silence of judges too often prevails. Another series of actions must follow up doctrine - partnerships and meetings like this one. That was important because regular exchanging of information should take place for all professionals in the legal field. In order to overcome the crisis of justice it is necessary to reflect and to make proposals upon the scope of justice.

Harmonisation of law was another priority. Business law is disseminated by different organisations in Africa, for example. Are we not giving impossible tasks to magistrates; for instance, where elections are concerned? Results in this area will not be sudden. One speaker invoked the image of the traditional British lawn, pointing out that to get such a lawn you must tend and mow it for at least a hundred years.

These points about justice in the southern countries were reiterated and amplified by a speaker who since 1974 had led a research team for la Francophonie to promote exchange of views about cultural diversity. It was increasingly clear that respect for human rights is not something abstract but instead always involved the social and economic context.

In places in the south there is no rule of law as such, there are only micro-institutions that exist to underpin the notional rule of law at a macro-level. In Canada there is a code of ethics for justices, barristers, solicitors and different professions but these are altogether harder to find in the developing world. So the rule of law and bill of rights are underpinned by micro-institutions in la Francophonie and the Commonwealth. The research demonstrates that it is futile to look at the big picture – better to take ‘snapshots’ of the legal profession. The rule of law and fundamental rights ought to make progress simultaneously across all the different institutions and strata of society. Consequently we need to work at two levels: through education, changing thinking; and economically, improving material standards.

In the last two years African leaders have developed a new (some say over-ambitious) programme that focuses on an African-led revitalisation of the continent with the developed world as partner, not aid donor. At the last OAU summit in Lusaka in July 2001 the continent adopted this New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad). Launched by presidents Mbeki, Bouteflika and Obasanjo of South Africa, Algeria and Nigeria, it seeks to tackle two important challenges facing Africa: poverty eradication by means of sustainable development; and conflict resolution and the establishment of accountable government.

It was suggested that much of the synergy between la Francophonie and the Commonwealth could find expression in Africa by co-operation on the Nepad programme. The Commonwealth and la Francophonie, representing anglophone and francophone Africa and the chasm that sometimes divides these African states, could seek to enhance co-operation between them. The adoption by all African states, regardless of their background, of Nepad signified overriding priorities and principles beyond anglophonie or francophonie.

Trade as a force for development

A business charter for la Francophonie and the Commonwealth is desirable and the adoption of such a charter ought to make business favourable to the country that receives it. Here was an ideal opportunity to combine actions.

The Commonwealth countries had the advantage of accounting systems that were common in principle. The Commonwealth Business Council had an action plan on investment. It felt keenly the need to create a much clearer understanding of the roles that business and government must take. An agreement on 16 principles existed. Corruption was an integral problem on both sides of the equation and the Commonwealth Business Council wants to reach an accord on this.

Between Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings - at which it puts the combined business view from cross the Commonwealth to the heads of government - the Council encourages regional trade agreements between exporters and importers. It also encourages governments who want to work very quietly with business. A recent example was the telephone companies from across Africa who met in Mauritius. Another important role of the CBC was getting African countries to tell the stories of where they are successful. The CBC was unsure about British government support for the Commonwealth as a trading association.

Two speakers drew attention to new information technology-based developments that were helping to raise the technological temperature of Bangladesh. Illiterate village women in Bangladesh were now familiar with cellular telephones and it was clear that a critical factor in fighting poverty is female empowerment. The success of micro-credit schemes in Bangladesh was encouraging.

A special opportunity for collaboration was in the field of technical assistance through training, expert advice and institution building. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Assistance was the primary instrument of development co-operation in the Commonwealth and was particularly important for small states in the area of micro-business, education and health. Collaboration on teaching materials for African countries had already taken place.

Sound economic management and recognition of the central role of the stable market economy together embodied the best hope for conflict prevention.

Two presentations concerned with Romania and la Francophonie emphasised the differences between the latter and the Commonwealth and sought to give a blurred concept sharper contours. These speakers reiterated that la Francophonie was a cultural synthesis around the French language, whereas the Commonwealth was seen as organised around laws of economic and political conduct. It was stated that language creates cultural ties and that 'this need to talk is the origin of most of the values of our culture'.

Distressingly, la Francophonie had become 'a blurred concept amid post-modern neo-liberal ideas like [that of] the end of history'. It was seen as 'weak and uninteresting in contemporary intellectual current accounts'. Yet as the work of the Romanian existentialist Tristan Tzara, Brancusi and others should remind us, 'the voyage of la Francophonie' and the solidarity of ideas were not consigned to the past. We have, the speakers insisted, the responsibility to make la Francophonie a new reality. It has 'an open space to globalise, to harmonise but not standardise'. In this process the commercial, economic and trade-related aspects should not be allowed to dominate, because the life of the mind should never be subordinate to profit.

France-Romania trade was nevertheless an outstanding success story for la Francophonie: in 1993 it stood at 3.3m francs and by 2000 was worth nearly 12bn francs. Romania now has nearly 2000 small and medium-sized enterprises, most of them partnerships.

To sum up

In his summing up the chairman noted that a natural division of the subject matter had emerged in the course of the day. Description of the two organisations had tended to be followed by prescriptions and recommendations, a fair number of which had been made. These would repay special attention and ought to be highlighted in the book of the proceedings. The rule of law, human rights and duties towards partners in the south had also figured prominently, as had the nourishment of French literature by its southern partners. Finally, as more than 50 per cent of the Commonwealths citizens were less than 25 years of age, with a similar situation prevailing in la Francophonie, the role of youth in shaping the future for each organisation remained pivotal.

PROPOSALS

1. More energetic involvement of youth in both organisations was essential if they were to persist as international forces. In particular, *Common Ground*, the initiative of the Commonwealth Institute was commended. This is a planned web-based network of multi-use activities designed to enable young people especially to learn about other cultures in the context of the Commonwealth and its values.
2. Distance learning via IT, training and lifelong learning should be enhanced. That would have the advantage of reaching out more to young people in both ensembles.

La Francophonie should make sure that distance technologies modernised its teaching. Virtual universities held great promise.

3. Co-operation with the Nepad programme would help to meet many of the shared goals of la Francophonie and the Commonwealth in Africa.

4. It was important to widen the debate about the core values of each organisation and about how to implement them in practice.

5. The Commonwealth should recognise poverty as an abuse of human rights.

6. A review of the Memorandum of Understanding between la Francophonie and the Commonwealth is appropriate. It should frame a plan of action and outline joint initiatives to attain common objectives.

7. A first Franco-Commonwealth Games should be considered

8. Links with and between the universities of less developed countries should be strengthened - a network of philosophers and also of women researchers, signifying the importance of gender studies, already exists within la Francophonie and should be extended. There should be more joint research.

9. An action plan on investment would benefit both organisations, as would a business charter for the Commonwealth and la Francophonie. The business charter ought to carry special benefits for any country that adopted it.

10. Sticks as well as carrots were called for. Sovereignty, for example, continues to be a problematic concept and it should be balanced more often by the concept of accountability to citizens.

SEMINAR PROGRAMME

0930 **Introduction** by Sir Peter Petrie and M Jacques Viot (Chairmen of the Franco-British Council)

0945 **The Commonwealth/Francophonie today: institutional structures and influence in the world**

Introduced by

Richard Bourne, Head, Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London

M Jean-Michel Dumond, chef du Service des Affaires francophones, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris

Contributions:

The Hon. Flora MacDonald, Former Foreign Minister, Canada

M Daniel Petit, Secrétaire général administratif de l'Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie

James Aggrey-Orleans, Former Ghana High Commissioner in London

M Stélio Farandjis, Secrétaire général du Haut Conseil de la Francophonie

1115 **Achievements in the fields of Human Rights, Cultural Diversity and Education**

Introduced by

M Seydou Madani Sy, Médiateur de la République du Sénégal

David French, Director, Commonwealth Institute, London

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Claire Martin, London Liaison Officer, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

Henri Pallard, Professeur à l'Université Laurentienne, Vancouver

Sharon Robinson, Programme Manager, Commonwealth Foundation

1445 **Speech by M Maurice Druon**, Secrétaire perpétuel honoraire de l'Académie française

1450 The economic dimension (technical assistance, aid, trade and investment)

Introduced by

M Steve Gentili, Président de la BRED Banque Populaire,
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M Mohammed Diarra, Consultant d'entreprise, Secrétaire général
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1545 Co-operation and convergence

Introduced by

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1700 Conclusions

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SEMINAR PAPERS

are available as follows from the Franco-British Council by email or hard copy or via the Council website (address on back cover).

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(all the above are in English)

Some papers by francophone contributors are also available (in French only) from the British Section.

A complete transcript (in French) of the seminar papers is to be published in France in 2002.