

COLOMBO NOTEBOOK 3: THE LOST SUMMIT

“Different, but not divided”. That was the verdict of the Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak, on the 2013 Colombo CHOGM, speaking at the closing media conference. His persuasive attempts to draw attention to the voluminous final communiqué were to no avail, however, as once more the international media returned to the familiar subject of Sri Lanka, human rights and accountability.

What did the Colombo CHOGM achieve? If mere words were the measure, the outcomes were extensive. In addition to the communiqué, there was the Colombo Declaration on Sustainable, Inclusive and Equitable Development, the Kotte Statement on International Trade and Investment and the Magampura Declaration of Commitment to Young People – some 11,000 words in all. But, in truth, achievements were meagre. There were some valuable initiatives buried beneath a permafrost of decayed rhetoric and abandoned cliché, but locating them was scarcely worth the trouble. There is to be a Secretariat for the newly-formed Commonwealth Youth Council, based in Sri Lanka in premises provided by the government, and with pledges of two-year funding support from Pakistan. There were new centres promised, with Mauritius offering to host a Climate Finance Skills Hub, and Malta willing to establish a Small States Centre of Excellence. A study would look at easing the free movement of Commonwealth citizens. The Commonwealth Media Development Fund would be resuscitated. A High-Level Group of Heads would prepare a distinctive Commonwealth response to the post-2015 development agenda. A Ministerial group would look at the priority development concerns of small states, and so on. But there was precious little evidence of ‘thought leadership’, the Secretariat’s new buzz-word. Instead, much of the language simply restated existing UN and other international agreements. Why should the Commonwealth develop partnerships and extend networks (as it so relishes doing) if it has nothing distinctive to say on the global agenda?

The reason for this absence of content was evident at the Opening Ceremony, two days before. The Nelum Pokuna theatre, built with Chinese expertise and money, was alive with an exciting fusion of music, dance and costume. Then the Commonwealth’s political leaders began to emerge, one by one, through a gilded sliding door worthy of any celebrity game show. One Prime Minister was so startled to find a large audience suddenly before him that he turned and attempted to retrace his steps, only to be pushed back onstage by unseen hands. As the 51 countries represented filed into their seats it was quickly apparent that this was barely a Heads of Government meeting at all – and as much a meeting of foreign ministers, deputy prime ministers, vice-presidents, cabinet secretaries and High Commissioners. Only 26 were Presidents and Prime Ministers (and a few of those were not really Heads of Government). There was one Head of State – the Governor-General of Tuvalu. But around half of those heading country delegations were answerable for what they said and did to someone elsewhere - to their Head of Government back in their home capitals. It was a crucial – and fatal - change to the chemistry of the meeting and to what is normally its most productive element – the Retreat.

Just as some felt that the absence of content could be rectified by an interminable communiqué, so others felt that sheer delegate numbers would make up for the absence of their principal. Nigeria's President, Goodluck Jonathan, did not attend. But his Vice-President, Namadi Sambo, led a delegation of 126, at a cost (in development forgone) that must surely be indefensible. Given that only three delegates per country are allowed into the meeting room at any time, this made Botswana's five-strong team, Ghana's seven, Jamaica's three, India with four, Malta with five, Sierra Leone with four and even the UK's nineteen-strong delegation much more the appropriate norm.

Not, of course, that David Cameron spent much time at the meeting. Immediately after the Opening Ceremony he left for Jaffna and the North, trailing TV cameras, and later delivered his ultimatum on accountability to President Rajapaksa. He then headed back to the UK a day early.

Cameron's Minister for the Commonwealth, Hugo Swire, had earlier in the week caused offence by a rather ill-judged speech at the closing of the People's Forum. Sri Lanka's foreign minister, Professor G.L. Peiris, later hit back claiming that, as well as criticising Sri Lanka, Swire had also attacked Malaysia on its human rights record (he had not). This led Malaysia's foreign minister to launch a bitter attack on the British and their colonial 'double standards'. An FCO official later clarified that the Minister had not attacked Malaysia; he had criticised Malawi (he had not). In fact, as it turned out, he had criticised the Maldives but by then everyone was too muddled and tired to take the matter further.

Sri Lanka went to great lengths to be good hosts. The government will have undoubtedly benefited from the degree of international support they received; and the President will relish his new role as Chairperson of the Commonwealth. Some, especially certain hoteliers, will have done very well for themselves. And the people of Sri Lanka, of whatever hue and for differing reasons, will have been glad for that passing moment of tangible Commonwealth solidarity. After decades of conflict, and natural disasters such as the 2004 Tsunami that claimed so many lives, they clearly valued that contact and empathy with people from around the world.

Why did the Commonwealth not ask for more in return? The Sri Lankan government repeatedly argued that this was a summit in Sri Lanka, not on Sri Lanka. Yet, in all truth, the Sri Lanka issue was inescapable. The media made it so – but so did the often off-stage discussions on peace and reconciliation, the sometimes whispered conversations on human rights and the Commonwealth Secretary-General's on-going 'good offices' engagement with Sri Lanka. Had David Cameron not just threatened from afar but instead engaged with colleagues like Jacob Zuma, of South Africa, and his host, perhaps the Commonwealth could have made a genuine and distinctive contribution to the process of healing and justice in Sri Lanka. Perhaps an independent and international group of Commonwealth experts could have been established, working with the Sri Lankans, to authenticate visual and other material submitted to it relating to the whole of the 26-year conflict (and not just the final months). Perhaps a high-level advisory group of Heads (including South Africa) could have been formed to advise President Rajapaksa on the process of reconciliation. There *was* an argument for meeting in Sri Lanka so soon after the end of the conflict (albeit a rather poor one); but the case was not effectively made, and a chance was missed.

Only Grenada did not attend the Colombo CHOGM (and this was unlikely to have been due to a one-nation boycott, more a question of cost). But, as CHOGM drew near, Heads quietly voted with their feet, as some of us predicted they might. The *raison d'être*, and the life-blood, was therefore sucked out of the summit.

It was not just the credibility of Commonwealth values that was on the line in Sri Lanka – it was also the Commonwealth's reputation as an innovator, ideas-generator, consensus-builder, connector and campaigner. Colombo is not the first of the Commonwealth's 'lost' summits, and it will not be the last. But it has made the immediate road ahead that much harder to travel.

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