

**Speech by Rt Hon Don McKinnon,  
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Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C.  
Thursday, May 25<sup>th</sup> 2006**

***Building Sustainable Democracies – the Commonwealth way***

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Mr Chairman,  
Your Excellencies,  
Ladies & Gentlemen,

I always enjoy coming back to this city. 50 years ago almost to the day, I graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School here in the District, before spending a lengthy period chasing horses and cattle – and being chased by a moose – in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming.

Growing up in a political town, I was at school with the sons and daughters of Congressmen, Senators, lobbyists and Government workers. I stood in Pennsylvania Avenue in January 1957 watching President Eisenhower's inaugural parade. Senator Kefauver was a next door neighbour in Spring Valley. Vice President Nixon lived a few blocks away in the same area. And naturally I had to take the required courses in American History and American Government – courses which I always regarded as good for citizenship-building.

Not that I ever considered going into politics at that time. But by the process of osmosis, concern for one's country and the usual misplaced belief that one could change things, I became a political candidate 13 years later, albeit an unsuccessful one. 9 years later I was successful, which set me on the path that brings me here today.

I'm delighted to be invited to address you at CSIS. Your work is similar to some of ours: promoting democracy and global security, economic prosperity and political stability. The CSIS can be, and has been, a great asset to this country: your strategic counsels are of great importance to the foreign policy of the world's leading power. And that foreign policy is the sub-text of my speech tonight.

Tonight I wish to talk about three issues which I believe are of interest to the US, as they are to the world. They are **democracy, conflict** and **cultural understanding**.

I'd like to try and look at them through the world's prism, through the American prism, and most importantly through the Commonwealth prism. I have no doubt that I won't agree with you on everything – but equally I have no doubt that as

Americans, as Commonwealth citizens, and between us as global citizens – we can indeed share ways of meeting the great challenges of our times.

For challenges they are.

‘Freedom’ and ‘**democracy**’ are words which are much used and much heard here in the US and in the Commonwealth. They are our deepest-held beliefs. We also know what they mean in practice.

They mean a vote and a voice for ordinary citizens – government of, by, and for the people in the blessed words of your 16<sup>th</sup> President – and the prospect of orderly transfers of power. You can say what you like about Florida in November 2000, but the fact that power could peacefully change hands while there were still questions being raised over the last few thousand votes in the last of 50 States, is an extraordinary tribute to what we understand by the term democracy.

But perhaps democracy really starts to bite when the vote is the cue for a government actually to govern, through a public sector and a civil service which can turn policy into practice, and which can deliver accountability, efficiency, fairness, transparency and more....

Even the world's most developed countries, and its proudest and oldest democracies, are ‘works in progress’. Democracy is not a conclusion, it's a process. Based as I now am in the UK, I see an almost daily digest of news about the ways that some of the oldest and indeed the best democratic systems in the world are displaying deficiencies, and need to adopt the policy of constant reformation.

And if we have problems with the more mature democracies, no wonder we struggle in encouraging other countries to embrace the idea – countries without the years of painstaking effort, the institutions, the pluralist cultures. Countries that not only want democracy but the development benefits that are supposed to go with it.

If I am forgiven a cliché, it's very easy for the US, the Commonwealth and whomever to talk about democracy, but it's always harder to walk the talk.

**Conflict**, too, is – if not, mercifully, the stuff of our daily lives – then the stuff of our daily television news bulletins. In the last 15 years, we have seen yet more appalling conflict in the Balkans, in Africa, Afghanistan, Iraq. Even if it is now largely intra-state conflict, rather than cross-border conflict, it is conflict nonetheless. Look at two facts in Africa. First the good news that, 20 years ago, there were as many as 20 armed conflicts on that continent; while now, they can be counted on the fingers of one hand. But balance that with Africa's ‘Forgotten War’ in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has claimed over 4 million

lives since 1998. If the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw human-kind at its most un-kind - and destructive - then the 21<sup>st</sup> Century could yet become worse.

Whether we like it or not, conflict is a fact of our lives.

So, too, is the fact that **cultural divides, religious divides and imposed boundaries** are the source of potential new conflict, and a real threat to the fabric of the democratic societies in which we have invested so much.

Most obviously, I am talking about religious extremism and terrorism. But so, too, am I talking about the racial and ethnic tension that blights so many of our societies. So too am I referring to a growing underclass, particularly of young people with no prospects, who feel alienated, disenfranchised, at best sullenly indifferent and at worst deeply resentful of the societies in which they live. A roll call of place names – from New York to Madrid to London to Paris, from the West Bank to the Caribbean to Pakistan to Sri Lanka to Egypt to Indonesia – will leave none of us in any doubt as to what happens when faiths, ethnicities, communities and nations fail to understand and respect each other.

And we know that much of this cultural mis-understanding takes the form of antagonism towards the so-called 'Western' way of life, and particularly the American way of life. When Danish flags were burned over the newspaper cartoon depictions of the Prophet Mohammed, it was a change to see a red and white cross burning, not the stars and stripes.

These are of course crude introductions to my three themes. The simple point is that these are the world's themes, and in particular they are the US' themes. And where I come in tonight is that they are also very much *the Commonwealth's* themes, and I'd like now to try and show you how we in the Commonwealth are responding to them. I'm back to my title: *'Building Sustainable Democracies – the Commonwealth Way'*.

But before I look at those three themes through the Commonwealth prism, let me give you **a very quick portrait of the Commonwealth**.

The Commonwealth is 53 nations and 1.8 billion people, from the giant that is India to tiny Tuvalu in the Pacific Islands, with a population of 11,000. One third of the world's population, one quarter of its countries, nearly a quarter of its trade. Caribbean, European, African, Asian, Pacific, rich and poor, of every colour and creed. Former colonies, dominions, protectorates, trusteeships: we've got them all. Those nations are bound as equals, and they share the fundamental beliefs of democracy and freedom. Our Heads of Government meet every 2 years for 3 days: in that time they assert their convictions and (as I'll tell you) sometimes take action on them there and then – at the same time, they set us in the Secretariat work priorities for the next 2 years.

Forget the British Commonwealth. It died in 1949. Yes, of course we are born of an Empire – but we have transcended Empire and bound ourselves with the values of freedom and equality. The modern Commonwealth is in some ways the child of Nehru. In 1948 India turned its back on the British monarchy and became a republic, but it had no intention of losing its network of friends and partners in the Commonwealth. The 1949 London Commonwealth Declaration was the result. We now have only 16 countries that retain the British monarch as their Head of State.

I frequently quote Arnold Smith, a Canadian who was the first Commonwealth Secretary-General. 'The Commonwealth may just prove to be the best and most lasting legacy of the British Empire', he said. Born from the best of British, and now the best that multilateralism can offer.

The twin pillars of the Commonwealth are Democracy and Development. Democracy I will come on to talk about; while Development is done through a small fund which delivers high class advice and support in carefully targeted areas.

I could list a litany of good Commonwealth things – things which you might not know, like our model legislation on money-laundering, our prescription for the recovery of illegal assets, our trade advisers supporting WTO negotiations, our Protocols to manage the migration of teachers and nurses, our extraordinarily powerful young 'Ambassadors for Positive Living', so vital for changing opinions and supporting young people with AIDS.

I'll just say that the Commonwealth's authority comes in several forms.

First, the power of the combined voice. On the eve of last December's WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong, the 53 Commonwealth countries speaking as one on the subject of multilateral trade and the need for a true 'development' outcome to the Doha negotiations, to let poor countries trade their way out of poverty, is a prime example.

Second, the power of people who speak the 'same language'. Not just English: I mean the shared language of institutions, parliaments, legal and education systems.

Third, it's the power of giving voice to those who are not often heard. 32 of the 53 are officially 'small states', all burdened with typical problems – environmental degradation, crime, under-development, isolation, lack of critical mass, and more. In the Commonwealth, Tuvalu has every bit as much of a platform as India. But small states will always remain small, and under-endowed, and vulnerable.

Last and perhaps above all, it's the power of family – of people who have come together almost by accident – who may, in family parlance, have sibling rivalries

and barely thought-about distant cousins, but who still feel bound to an organisation, its beliefs, and its opportunities.

So I'd like now to look more closely at the Commonwealth and tonight's three themes of **democracy**, **conflict** and **cultural understanding**.

I mentioned elections, and the good government that they are supposed to bring about. We observe elections and make recommendations on how to improve the electoral environment. We also build electoral and other democratic institutions, but I won't dwell on those.

Rather, I'd like to dwell on the cases where **democracy** is threatened, and where **conflict** thereby becomes a possibility or a reality.

For a start, we all know where we stand.

In Harare in 1991 the Commonwealth made an explicit statement of its core, underlying principles of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, judicial independence, gender equality, just and honest government and sustainable development.

But the Commonwealth's determination to deal robustly with serious or persistent violations of democracy within its membership was given concrete effect in a decision taken at Millbrook in New Zealand in 1995 to set up a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, or what we call CMAG. Unlike the UN Security Council it meets at ministerial, rather than diplomatic level. Equally, there are no vetoes or permanent membership, and decisions are made by consensus. Although its powers of sanction are limited, CMAG can suspend members from the Councils of the Commonwealth, and past experience has shown not only that it is willing to do so, but also that those sanctioned have not taken this lightly. Most have sought to come back: and I can assure you that one of our dearest wishes is for a truly democratic Zimbabwe, which pulled out of the Commonwealth at the end of 2003, to come back. The ball is in Zimbabwe's court.

CMAG has, overall, been a quiet success. In Nigeria, for instance, where suspension was followed by a return to democracy. Likewise in Fiji and Sierra Leone, where un-constitutional breaches in governance were followed, after great effort, by a return to democracy and order.

CMAG currently has one country on its agenda: Pakistan. In fact, whilst CMAG's engagement with Pakistan has highlighted some major differences, it has been readily apparent that the Commonwealth has always shown great consideration for the people and indeed, the Government, of this important Islamic state. Progress has been made in Pakistan in a number of ways: at our behest, General Musharraf prepared a roadmap of democratic reform and implemented most of its elements. There are, today, functioning legislatures at the centre and

in the provinces; more women and minorities in Parliament; more accountability in the fight against corruption.

But a lasting solution to the core issue remains to be found. The bottom line is that General Musharraf is both President and Chief of Army Staff. This is the only example of its type in the Commonwealth, and in Malta last November our leaders found this, I quote, 'incompatible with the basic principles of democracy and the spirit of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration'.

But Pakistan has – in all this – shown regard for the Commonwealth and what it stands for, and has actively engaged with CMAG. By virtue of CMAG's continuous review and monitoring, the Commonwealth is perhaps the only international political organisation actively involved in working for a return to full democracy in Pakistan today.

Of course, CMAG acts with the endorsement of a quarter of the world's leaders; with their blessing, so to speak.

Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings are remarkable above all for their informality and directness. It was Pierre Trudeau in 1971 who got Heads to agree that they would never come to Meetings with prepared speeches. Nor with lots of civil servants: indeed, the 'retreat' component of the Meeting is for Heads of Government and Heads only. 54 people in a room: I'm the 54<sup>th</sup>. Many other organisations, like APEC, have copied the idea of the retreat.

The accent is on the engagement of political leaders; to have them determine policy and to give them a stake and interest in the joint decisions of the association. Apart from anything, this is a great incentive for them to keep their word.

Another important activity of the Commonwealth that is directed towards the creation and maintenance of sustainable democracies is the employment of what we call the Secretary-General's 'Good Offices', either through my personal intervention or through one of my special envoys. This form of action is undertaken in situations where the future of democracy in a particular member state, for a variety of possible reasons, has come under threat. Often, despite highly sensitive situations, access is granted to the Commonwealth, where such access is denied to others.

The Commonwealth cannot command an army or navy to solve some of the world's trickiest conflicts. It has no missiles, very little money even. And yet it can do what most others plainly can not do: it can bring friendly pressure and influence to bear.

A lot of work can be done before any of the worst options of sanctions and even military action are called upon. It is in the nature of Good Offices that despite

some impressive triumphs, the benefits of our work have largely had to remain unsung, and – given the nature of discreet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy – may well remain unsung. But I can tell you that we have deployed our Good Offices in the last year in Cameroon, The Gambia, Guyana, Kenya, Swaziland, Tonga, Maldives. Just one example from a few years ago: the Good Offices helped broker the '*mwafaka*' agreement between the mainland Tanzanian government and that of the island of Zanzibar.

No doubt this shared experience of building democracy is behind the interest of some states in becoming members of our association. With Cameroon and Mozambique as members, and five former German colonies as well, we have gone beyond our anglo-centric roots. We have a diverse and eclectic list of interested parties, ranging from Algeria to Rwanda to Yemen to even Palestine. This is clearly something to be encouraged by. Our leaders will be reviewing the criteria for future membership at their next meeting.

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That said, history has shown us again and again that **economic prosperity** is just as important as that pursuit of democracy.

It is a guiding Commonwealth principle that Democracy and Development are inextricably and organically linked. In this context I commend to you a very important Commonwealth report, produced by a group under the chairmanship of Dr Manmohan Singh, now Prime Minister of India, which sets out this close inter-linkage.

We pursue development in many ways. Not the least of them is our quest for a fairer international trading system, which looks after the poorest and the most vulnerable, by special treatment if necessary. We firmly believe that it is in the best interests of the developed countries themselves to have a level playing field, and to enable trade to lift poor countries out of poverty.

As things stand, candidly speaking, my optimism has turned towards pessimism. We have yet to witness this spirit in the approach of the major parties to the Doha Development Round negotiations. Fingers are rightly pointed at the EU, and even at developing countries themselves, who hamper free trade with subsidies or punitive tariffs. And the US, too, rightly receives its share of criticism. Its subsidies in areas like cotton are simply unacceptable. In 2002, US cotton farmers received more than \$4 billion in government assistance – more than the entire GDP of a country like Benin, whose only possible economic hope is to sell .... cotton.

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So we need development because we can't eat democracy. So too we need **harmony – a true spirit of democracy** – if our treasured elections and our institutions are to have any meaning. I alluded earlier to the disharmony in some of our societies, not least some of those in the Commonwealth itself. We share a common humanity, yet all around we see actions - deliberate or not - which fragment humanity.

Dialogue, understanding and goodwill - at any level and between any protagonists - are the only solutions to the ills of chauvinism and extremism. The alienation that breeds violence has many roots. Religion, language, ethnicity and culture are among them. But so too are poverty, illiteracy, environmental degradation and political injustice.

Luckily, the Commonwealth has for long been dealing with such problems. Nelson Mandela famously said in 1994 that: 'The Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity'. We are a remarkable melting pot of linguistic, religious, cultural, and ethnic groups. So are many of our individual members. We must put this valuable resource to good use.

That is why Heads of Government in Malta tasked me to look at ways in which the Commonwealth can contribute to the international efforts to promote cross-cultural dialogue. Also, at how it can use best practice from within its own ranks to enhance, in practical ways, mutual understanding and respect and social harmony.

That work is now under way. A Task Force is currently being assembled, to come up with practical ideas. Each of the Commonwealth Ministers' meetings this year and next will be asked to consider how their own fields can contribute to the subject. Our Ministers of Youth are doing so in the Bahamas as I speak. By the time the Task Force reports to the next Heads of Government meeting in Kampala towards the end of 2007, we expect it to have provided informed insights on 'community' and 'marginalisation', and new policy measures and tools, handbooks, and citizenship education programmes for Governments to use.

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Let me **conclude**.

I began by recalling my own links with the US: links that have left a lasting impression. It is a country with which I have deep bond, but it is also a country that is under a multiplicity of pressures – because it is the world's only super-power.

Within the 53-nation Commonwealth the US has many allies. I have once again had very useful discussions with senior members of the Administration here



today. There is already good cooperation with non-governmental players: we are in close touch with NDI, with the Carter Center, and with IRI.

At the same time, the US has uneasy relationships with some members of the Commonwealth. We all know only too well that Iraq, trade, UN reform and others are seriously sensitive and divisive issues.

I have sought to say that the challenges of democracy, conflict and promoting understanding are challenges for us all. I have tried to show how we in the Commonwealth go about meeting them.

I end with a return to my title and what I called my sub-text. *'The foreign policy of the world's leading power'* is essentially the way that one country, the United States of America, relates with the world. *'Building Sustainable Democracies - The Commonwealth Way'* is how 53 countries relate with each other, and with the world. I am the first to admit that the Commonwealth is anything but perfect. But the principles of open debate and consensus are extraordinarily powerful and positive bonds between us.

Finally, a true story. In 1989, a rather poorly briefed Prime Minister asked a visiting Commonwealth envoy whether the United States and Japan were members of the Commonwealth. Back came the reply: the Americans left the Commonwealth some 200 years ago – and an American General made sure the Japanese never joined!

Thank you.