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BY HUGH SEGAL



Hugh Segal

Editor's Note: This commentary was submitted, with Segal's permission, by Sir Ronald Sanders, a HNN contributor and -- like Segal -- a member of the Commonwealth's Eminent Persons Group.

These days, when alliances are under stress, monetary unions confront their own dysfunction, and financial indicators are angst-ridden, the Commonwealth retains its potential as an organization for global good, but only just.

Voluntary, historic, multifaith, multiracial and multicultural, this association, which spans every part of the world, this network of networks, has worked in a multitude of ways to make life better for its 2.1 billion citizens in 53 member states. The world's largest democracy, India, population 1.2 billion, co-exists

with the small Pacific island state of Tuvalu, population 10,000. Scholarships, distance learning, parliamentary co-operation and education, agricultural support, development, trade advocacy, anti-poverty programs, and health and democracy promotion have characterized this network of principled co-operation. However, in recent time, it began to lose its credibility and relevance in a world that desperately needs the healing touch it had brought to conflict and disparity in the past.

When Commonwealth leaders met in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in 2009, they publicly acknowledged that any organization, decades old, needs such reform from time to time. They agreed on two measures. The first was the establishment of an "Eminent Persons Group" (EPG) to look at how the Commonwealth might be updated and made more relevant, impactful and influential in the 21st century. Second, they mandated the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, established by Commonwealth heads of government in 1995 to deal with serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth fundamental values, to consider how its actions might be made more effective when core principles of democracy, human rights and rule of law are violated by member states.

Commonwealth heads of government are meeting in Perth, Australia, in three weeks time to consider these reports that were submitted to them four weeks ago after 13 months of work, in the case of the EPG.

Inexplicably, current chair-in-office, the prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, decided that the reports should be kept secret. The host of the meeting, Australia's prime minister, has indicated that while her national position is that the reports should be made public before the summit meeting, she is constrained to join the Trinidadian prime minister to keep the reports from being made public in the interest of "consensus." As a result, helpful suggestions around more work on HIV/AIDS, a stronger and supportive presence on human rights, democracy and rule of law, a Commonwealth Youth Corps, focused disaster-relief preparations, economic and trade support for smaller states, achieving development goals, work on climate change, addressing the needs of women, and modernizing the secretariat's communications strategies to the benefit of all member states are left in the dark.

Instead, some recommendations have been subject to distortion and misinterpretation by representatives of a few governments that mistakenly

believe there is some marginal benefit to them in stifling progress on these issues.

From the outset, EPG members committed to openness and transparency in the process that would lead to their conclusions and recommendations. To this end, regular updates and news releases were issued after each of the five meetings -- more than 300 civil society groups and many governments and individuals made submissions -- and feedback was always solicited. EPG members organized input sessions and made themselves available for consultation in their own countries and, when invited, travelled widely to brief, but more importantly to listen to opinions on the reforms that the Commonwealth needs if it is to continue to be relevant to its people and its times. Keeping the report secret is harmful to informed, open and transparent debate about the organization's future.

At the end of the fourth meeting in London this past March, having read hundreds of submissions and listened to people throughout the Commonwealth, the group concluded: "The Commonwealth is in danger of becoming irrelevant and unconvincing as a values-based association" and "to safeguard against this danger, we will recommend to leaders the adoption of proposals that will strengthen the Commonwealth, both as an association of governments and of peoples."

The last Eminent Persons Group was established by the then Secretary-General, Shridath Ramphal with the strong support of prime ministers Rajiv Gandhi, Brian Mulroney and Bob Hawke of India, Canada and Australia respectively, and its 1986 report dealt with the issue of apartheid. The report was made public -- four months before the historic London Commonwealth summit. That report, the publicity it received, the support it garnered, and the pressure placed on South Africa in the years following, is credited with being a catalyst to the end of legal racism and segregation in that country. The report of the current EPG, "A Commonwealth of the People: Time for Urgent Reform," may not result in such a historic, life-altering transformation, but it does offer essential and practical ways to make better the lives of one-third of the world's population.

Leadership is about the courage to engage freely on ideas that serve the public interest. Advocates of keeping the reports secret are really advocates of weakening the Commonwealth -- one of the great and historic associations that still has the potential to embody and reflect the best of the human spirit.

Senator Hugh Segal is the Canadian representative on the 10- member Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group. He lives in Kingston, Ontario and represents Kingston-Leeds-Frontenac in the Canadian Senate. He turns 61 on Thursday, Oct. 13.