Preface

When I was asked by the Secretary-General to chair this Commonwealth Commission, I felt both privileged and challenged. It has been wonderful for me to work with an extraordinary group of exceptionally astute, informed and far-seeing individuals drawn from many different countries of the Commonwealth, bringing a huge wealth of experience and insight to our meetings and interactions.

We recognised the difficulty as well as the momentous nature of the task that the Secretary-General had given us, in line with the decision taken in the 2005 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 'to explore initiatives to promote mutual understanding and respect' throughout the Commonwealth. The importance of understanding and respect lies partly in their intrinsic value – indeed they are indispensable parts of good living in peace and harmony with each other – but it also lies in their contribution to restraining and removing the group-based violence and terrorism that have become such pernicious features of the contemporary world.

Acts of terrorism and homicide are, of course, criminal activities calling for effective security measures, and no serious analysis of group violence can fail to begin with that basic understanding. But the analysis cannot end there, since many social, economic and political initiatives can be undertaken to confront and defeat the appeal on which the fomenters of violence and terrorism draw to get active foot soldiers and passive sympathisers. The process of recruitment is a battle for people's minds, making crucial use of turbid sentiments and crude reasoning. Cultivated disrespect of target groups as well as engineered misunderstanding of the ways of the world are integral parts of the process of instigating and sustaining violence. This is why the battle against terrorism and group violence has to go much beyond policing criminal activities and confronting military challenges – important though they are.

This report is particularly concerned with what we have called 'civil paths to peace'. The ways and means of pursuing these civil – in contrast with military – routes include a great many instruments, varying from intellectual confrontation of confused and flammable readings of the world (such as unexamined beliefs in the alleged inevitability of a clash between distinct 'civilisations') to institutional changes – governmental and others – that could make it easier for different groups of people to see each other as human beings with a variety of concerns and affiliations that need not be constantly at loggerheads with each other. There are also institutional pitfalls of which we have to be aware, for example a single-minded concentration on expanding the dialogue between religious groups may seriously undermine other civil engagements linked with language, literature, cultural functions, social interactions and political commitments that help to resist the exploitation of religious differences which begins by downplaying other affiliations. The battle for people's minds cannot be won on the basis of a seriously incomplete understanding of the wealth of social differences that make individual human beings richly diverse in distinct ways, rather than being lined up on opposite sides of one gigantic division – religious, racial, national, or whatever.

If the institutional changes needed for pursuing civil paths to peace call for clarity of thought, they

also demand organised policies, programmes and initiatives with adequate reach. We have to understand, on the one hand, the role of economic inequalities, social humiliations and political disenfranchisement in generating disrespect and hostility, but we also have to take the concrete steps that are needed for making the hard and often exacting changes in the way the world is organised, in order to remove, to the extent possible, the deeper sources of hostility. Through investigating the linkages between deprivations – past and present – and the fomentation of disaffection, we have tried to identify the central concerns that could usefully guide institutional changes initiated by the respective governments, individually and jointly. But the civil paths to peace are not confined to governmental activities only, since the cultivation of disrespect and hostility can also be resisted by the working of the media, of political processes, of educational activities and other means of generating mutual understanding. We have also identified specific areas of concentration that can sensibly have priority in what we call 'the way forward', and we hope that this will be followed up by an action programme to be developed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General in consultation with member governments on particular policy recommendations.

Central to our work has been the Commonwealth's traditional approach of using multilateralism, making the best possible use of dialogue and discussion. Most members of this Commission shared the conviction that efforts to overcome the scourge of terrorism and group violence in the world could have gone much better had a more multilateral approach been used. But since there is no merit in finger pointing, we have concentrated instead on what can be done here and now to help make the world a more peaceful place than it currently is.

We have argued that being guided by the Commonwealth's multilateral tradition has enormous benefits to offer for all Commonwealth countries, and even beyond our borders. We live in an era of overwhelming global interdependence, and the Commonwealth has duties not only to itself, but also to the world as a whole. We have taken the liberty of discussing not only what we can do for ourselves, but also what we can present to others who share this earth with us, and on whom our own security and peace will, in turn, also depend. In this sense, the report is a modest attempt to present a Commonwealth-based understanding of the civil demands for world peace.

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