

## Chapter 5: Political Participation

### Dialogue and inclusion

- 124 In the previous four chapters, this report outlined some of the reasons why respect and understanding are so important at the present time, and the relevance of the Commonwealth approach in engendering a sense of these basic values. It also discussed some of the conceptual issues that underlie violence and concluded that a deeper analysis of these should first inform public debate, and only then feed in to the development of new policies or actions.
- 125 This chapter begins with an analysis of the constraints that all countries face in ensuring the whole of their population – not just elites and holders of public office – feel fully involved in what has been termed ‘government by discussion’. This is about more than putting the right political processes in place, it is also about how these processes are facilitated so that they are truly inclusive – it is the ‘how’ of political behaviour, not just the ‘what’.
- 126 Furthermore, ways of engendering a sense of belonging, particularly for groups that are traditionally excluded from politics, are discussed. The chapter also considers how political participation might be broadened and extended in situations of peace as well as in post-conflict situations. Going beyond this analysis, therefore, the chapter begins to look at public policy and the messages for governments and civil society. This dual focus – on both substantive analysis and policy messages – is also reflected in future chapters.

### An emphasis on the ‘how’ of political participation

- 127 A sense of exclusion can arise even in well-established, participatory democratic systems. This is because political inclusion is not only about the form that political systems take (for example, the type of electoral system), but, just as importantly, about how political participation is facilitated throughout the political cycle (and not just at elections). Thus, how debate is managed in local and national political forums, including parliament itself, will reflect on the extent to which the rules of engagement, written or unwritten, provide a containing environment for expression of conflict. It will also be reflected in a context that does, or does not, also allow members to express their strong concerns and feel that they have been listened to – and thus accorded respect.
- 128 Different perceptions co-exist about the role of opposition parties. Whilst some act primarily as though they are the party in waiting, and therefore spend time consolidating their power base, others focus on the real job of opposition. This is to hold the government of the day to account by listening to the experience of their constituents and being sufficiently well-informed by evidence and argument to support or question the impact of current or planned public policies. Again, the latter approach will make

people feel represented and included; the former, typically, will not. The representative duties of parliamentarians are obviously of great importance for the functioning of a civil approach to peace and the avoidance of extremism.

129 Apart from the workings of parliaments, other aspects of democratic systems are also important if 'government by discussion' is to have real meaning. For example, it is critical that people who purport to represent different factions, including parties in conflict, really are representative in a meaningful way, and have representative views that can be attributed to their supporters. All too often, debate can be taken over, or misappropriated, by vocal and more extreme members of a group. These people may not have the actual standing or authority they claim to have; yet their tendency to grab the headlines with inflammatory remarks tends to be seized upon by the media. The perceptions of the general community are then skewed into believing that all members of the group agree with these inflammatory and disturbing statements.

130 Seeking out those who do in fact represent the group, and do so in a balanced and good-tempered way, is essential and it is a delicate task for government and civil society. The calmer, yet more authentic, leaders and would-be leaders within communities may be repelled by polemic and aggressive behaviour and language. They may, therefore, quite rationally opt not to participate because of the tone, the nature of the discussion, and the manner with which their case is (supposedly) being put. Extremists may also be more likely to be heard if the government does not adequately heed parliament and other legitimate or reasonable representatives.

### **Communication and consultation styles matter**

131 Styles of communication and consultation are particularly important for the participation of women and young people. If serious, experienced and well-intentioned people, with a strong sense of the common good, leave the discussion or never join it, this creates an opportunity for others who may have narrower self-seeking interests to step into the void.

132 In many countries, women are given limited opportunities to develop their skills in participative debate and decision-making at local or national level. In such circumstances, they cannot and do not contribute as equal partners to debates on the development of their communities or countries. One constraint is the absence of laws on gender equality broadly based on international human rights standards. However, the norms of patriarchy and generations of past practice also determine the extent of women's participation in politics at all levels.

133 Nevertheless, it is important to underline that there has been accelerating change in many parts of the Commonwealth on women's participation at the highest levels. The development over many years of a strong female presence in the legal system, in general, and the judiciary, in particular, has led to the appointment this year of the first

woman Chief Justice in Ghana, Justice Georgina Woode. These examples of public commitment to make constructive use of women's agency going well beyond the concern with women's well-being reflect the development over many years, under many governments, of a continuing concern to make an increasingly equal place for women in the legal profession. This is a development that increases the sense among all women that the law need not be blind to women's concerns, but in addition allows the gains from women's active agency to be utilised in the legal systems of these countries. The leadership, for example, of Judge Kate O'Regan on human rights legislation in the South African constitutional court, has greatly assisted the reach of the legal system in this newly democratic country.

134 Elsewhere, in Afghanistan, women participated in the Constitutional *Loya Jirga*<sup>xvi</sup> (Grand Assembly) elections in June 2002 and in drafting the new Constitution in 2004, and they stood as candidates in the parliamentary and provincial elections of 2005. With help from UN agencies (UNIFEM<sup>xvii</sup> and UNDP<sup>xviii</sup>), the women's participation project has also resulted in the adoption of a Constitution with strong provisions for gender equality, including a 25 per cent quota for women in the national and provincial assemblies (which has been achieved), and the formation of a women's caucus in parliament. Although the rise of insurgency, especially in rural areas, threatens these gains, a great deal has been achieved in women's participation in politics since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

135 And, to offer one final example, Commonwealth countries in South Asia have a lesson to teach others – that is: that women can reach the pinnacle of power. In Sri Lanka, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in 1959. Her religious background was Buddhism. Indira Gandhi was elected more than once as the Head of the Indian Government. Benazir Bhutto became the first woman Prime Minister of her country, Pakistan, as the Muslim world's first female Head of Government. Bangladesh has produced more than one female political leader in Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina.

## Young people's involvement requires nurturing

136 Many countries have mechanisms for consulting young people on political issues – for example, via dedicated surveys and more qualitatively by contacting young people's organisations and/or using research teams or interviewers to organise young people into focus groups in order to ascertain their views on a particular subject.

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xvi Loya Jirgas (Grand Assemblies) are called in Afghanistan irregularly, often by the ruler. They are attended by tribal/regional leaders, political, military and religious figures, royalty, government officials, etc. The meeting has no time limit, it continues until decisions are reached by consensus on the matter at hand.

xvii United Nations Development Fund for Women.

xviii United Nations Development Programme.

137 But very often this only goes so far; older, more established voices then take over to decide the public policy implications. This is particularly the case in contexts where relations of patriarchy and deference are strong. Young people do need positive role models in authority. But, crucially, they also need spaces in which to build their own confidence and capabilities and have their views taken into account.

138 Authority needs to be exercised in a way that does not end up marginalising the young and others with little formal voice.

139 Young people therefore emerge as an entry-point for political participation but also as an interest group and a vital resource. They have much more of a sense of the way the world is developing than the current generation of elders. We not only need young people in our families to show us how to work our new machines, we need them to help us design and work our new machinery of governance, and they need the opportunity to work together with groups of older people, as well as independently, to identify innovative ways of tackling deep-seated misconceptions and prejudices, first within their own age group, and then beyond it. There is something of an inter-generational division of labour to aim for:

*'We need younger Community leaders to be enthusiastic and give a lead in drawing our communities together. Older people can suggest ways and means by which this can be achieved – but it is the up-and-coming generation of political, civil and religious leaders who need to take up the cause of mutual respect and understanding. For this, they will need training, but above all, enthusiasm, dedication and motivation'.<sup>xix</sup>*

### **And civil society has an active role to play**

140 In our striving for more liberal democratic societies we have perhaps focused too much on the sporadic involvement given by elections as the solution to the problem of involvement. A society based on 'government by discussion' requires a strong civil society that plays an active role in political debate. Civil society is, of course, very diverse and civil society groups have a range of functions, not all of which are aimed at increasing political voice.

141 Nonetheless research has shown that the 'empowered' citizen emerges gradually, often through local-level debates around jobs, housing or other tangible issues, and only later (sometimes a generation later) gains the independence and knowledge to engage with higher level state processes. Civil society organisations, even if they are not overtly political, can therefore provide the building blocks with which their members may engage with political processes in future, should they wish to.

142 One striking example of this is the role that grassroots organisations played in combating the spread of HIV/AIDs in Australia in the early 1980s. It was at this time that Australia experienced a rapid increase in the incidence of HIV. Peaking in 1984, incidence rates then began to fall dramatically until around 1988.

143 For a long time, the success of early containment had been credited to national initiatives. Recent analysis,<sup>xx</sup> however, has shown that these initiatives – the establishment of research institutions, the provision of HIV testing and anti-retroviral drugs, all supported by significant government funding – all came *after* the decline in incidence rates had begun.

144 Well-organised grassroots activities and structures, by comparison, were in place by 1985. AIDS Action Committees (AACs) were created in major state capitals, the first as early as 1983. The first community-based organisation to create a dedicated office in the non-governmental AIDS sector was in place by 1984. And during this time, the medical profession began to rely on the Gay Health Update produced by the Victorian AIDS Council for information on how the epidemic was developing. Early reports in the press, the provision of clinical services and community activism all played a key role in Australia's success in combating the spread of HIV/AIDS.

145 Without government initiatives, the decline may not have lasted. This much is clear. But what the research does point to is the ability of community-based and non-governmental organisations to be pro-active; to successfully mobilise communities to provide early intervention and prevention. Governments should seek out organisations with this ability, and help them to build their capacity in a spirit of partnership.

### **Engendering a sense of belonging**

146 For any society to create a common vision for itself, it is necessary for it to find effective ways to nurture a sense of belonging among all its members, including young people. These members are not merely required to be of that society, they are also entitled to be treated in a way that values them as integral to the society. They need to have a sense of being part of a common destiny and a shared future. For this reason alone, there has to be some public endorsement and acceptance of identity even if there are plural identities involved. As mentioned previously, it is preferable for richly textured and multi-layered identities not to be collapsed simplistically into identification based on a single characteristic only, be that racial, linguistic or religious.

147 A traditional liberal and democratic understanding of societal membership has in the past tended to focus on recognition of individuals as citizens. The concept of citizenship is indifferent to group identity or identities – the idea of citizenship does not

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xx Plummer and Irwin 2006.

differentiate or discriminate between people with different identities, it looks at national belonging alone. Identity based on citizenship can amount to an essential lubricant of common belonging and inclusion to work. The idea of national citizenship may be more important for certain groups than others, and may matter in differing ways from one group or context to another.

148 Faith-based organisations have a potentially crucial role and can do much to overcome the constraints that those in the political system may experience. In particular, faith bodies that develop strong bonding relationships among their own members can be in a better position to encourage bridging relationships with those of other faith-identity communities. This can lead to a stronger articulation by faith communities in general of faith and spiritual-oriented approaches to tackling social problems. The role of spirituality in better understanding and responding to the causes of religious extremism and violence is a potentially rich terrain that requires space for consideration.<sup>xxi</sup>

149 The task is to build the foundations of a community that is both cohesive as well as diverse in its composition. This involves several elements whereby:<sup>xxii</sup>

- There is a common vision and all communities have a sense of belonging.
- The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued.
- Those from different backgrounds have similar opportunities. Language fluency and language barriers to entry into particular occupational categories are a prime example that can prevent this.
- Those from different backgrounds develop strong, positive relationships in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

### **Confidence-building in conflict situations carries additional risks**

150 Some very specific issues exist around dialogue in conflict situations, particularly when there has been outside military intervention. Even if military intervention is sanctioned by the United Nations, it does not mean that a UN force will be automatically welcomed or their presence accepted by local populations. Whether this happens will depend in large part on how the intervention is managed and how processes for dialogue with local leaders and people are developed. This involves literally how the actions of those on the ground are able to gain, or do not gain, the confidence of people and institutions. However bad the situation that led to the intervention, no occupying force can expect local support unless people themselves feel included and respected.

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xxi Taylor 2007.

xxii Malik 2005.

## Commonwealth principles in action

- 151 The Commonwealth is sometimes criticised for talking first, often, and for a very long time on an issue of contention without reaching any resolution. But this *Report of the Commission* endorses this approach as an essential way of dealing with problems of respect and understanding – as well as a way to reduce violence and the incidence and impact of terrorism.
- 152 Criticism of the Commonwealth approach fails to acknowledge that:
- The practical application of Commonwealth principles has yielded significant change in some of the largest conflicts of the contemporary world, such as South Africa.
  - Practitioners of these principles have gained currency for their style of engagement that respects differences of identity and viewpoint.
  - These principles place leaders in a strong and credible position in searching for the underlying causes of conflict and violence.
  - The Commonwealth approach has fresh relevance as the reputation of more confrontationalist approaches has begun to falter.
- 153 Talking alone cannot solve all the world's problems. It is doubtful what could have been achieved by talking for longer in Afghanistan, Yugoslavia or Rwanda as the events that occurred in all these places were not obviously due to a lack of dialogue but for other reasons. Sometimes conflict can escalate to extreme levels of violence so quickly (as in Rwanda) that face-to-face discussion is hard to achieve. But problems in Northern Ireland were resolved by talking, India and Pakistan are talking rather than going to war, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility to believe that in the end relations between Israel and Palestine may yet be resolved through a long-term process of dialogue and deeper mutual respect and understanding.

## Promoting democracy through institutional best practice

- 154 The Commonwealth is currently engaged in a wide range of activities designed to ensure adherence to best practice in democratic political participation. One example is the role of election observers – widely accepted as a mean to ensure that the processes of elections are fair and unbiased. This kind of intervention is especially valuable where recent past experience has meant that there is little public confidence in the democratic electoral process itself.
- 155 Election observation is an example of confidence building in that it is designed to deter the use of domineering or oppressive behaviour by particular groups, through independent documentation of the election process by third parties. Independence lies at its heart, indeed, the Commonwealth 'brand' is widely trusted perhaps more than any

other. The Commonwealth offers election observation only when invited and so all parties have an incentive to comply with international standards and a reason to accept the observers' judgments.

156 There is a rub, however, namely that election observation is an intervention that comes late in the process and inevitably avoids looking at behaviour and standards beforehand. A more holistic picture reveals that intimidation, exclusion and other indirect threats to general public confidence may be present a long time before an election is staged. The problem, therefore, largely occurs further upstream and needs to be tackled at that earlier point.

157 Limiting these influences may be laudable during an election process, but the problems may have set in well before the election campaign begins. There can be longstanding negative attitudes, practices and behaviour which become more plainly expressed during an election process. There is, therefore, a strong case to look at:

- how interventions to promote democratic engagement might be used in the period between election campaigns; and
- how to grow the capacity of local institutions and groups as buttresses for democracy.

158 The latter include genuinely independent electoral commissions to oversee behaviour and adherence to fair processes including funding arrangements for parties and candidates, parliamentary secretariats to support the scrutiny functions of parliamentarians, and finally technical assistance to election observer missions that train and support good practice among local election officials.

159 A bigger challenge even than this lies in finding new ways to promote legitimate and credible interaction between governments and oppositions after the elections in different Commonwealth countries. In circumstances where electoral systems are based on a single majority-simple plurality (SMSP) principle, the outcome can often be a winner-takes-all situation triggered by being the first-past-the-post. Holding a monopoly of executive power carries with it serious consequences and risks. Chief among these is the on-going need to involve and retain the confidence of opposition parties and candidates who do not participate in government.

160 Opposition involvement and buy-in to the process is valuable yet often elusive. Specifically, their involvement is critical to sustain backing for the legitimacy of the political system as opposed to the government of the day. In other words, the task is to strike a balance: to nurture backing for the office of government whilst remaining agnostic towards the office-holder.

161 Executive dominance of this kind is a direct cause for concern in itself. But it is particularly dangerous if it is in the hands of a particular ethnic or religious group,

perhaps via a party system that is built around ethno-religious lines. Interventions to help broaden out ‘government by discussion’ in systems where power is concentrated in the hands of the executive can be pursued in various ways. For leaders, such broadening can happen in three main ways, (these strategies are not mutually exclusive but each involves a particular area of concentration). They can:

- try to dilute the executive monopoly of power by building in some element of power sharing;
- strengthen the balancing role of parliament and the judiciary; and
- support media, civil society and community-based efforts to demand greater accountability.

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Building in an element of power sharing to the executive has been addressed, for instance by establishing extra-parliamentary forums in which government–opposition interaction is routinised, and where complex issues to do with public confidence in the democratic process are aired. The Commonwealth’s Good Offices work has sought to further this kind of assistance. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group acts as a guardian of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth. It is also possible for Commonwealth countries to turn to other Commonwealth states for expert assistance and advice, as the UK did from time to time in the Northern Ireland process.

