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MULTILATERALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM
the Commonwealth in the twenty-first century

a lecture given in
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by

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Dr Nizami, Director of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies; Dr Rowett, Warden of Rhodes House; distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure to be with you in Oxford this evening, and I am very grateful to Dr Nizami and Dr Rowett for inviting me to share some thoughts with you today.

Coming to a place like Oxford is always an inspiring experience. The enormous intellectual tradition of this city of dreaming spires is also humbling for most of us. I am particularly pleased that this invitation came jointly from the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and from Rhodes House, two outstanding institutions, both of which are major forums for cultural diversity and the promotion of peace and understanding among nations.

Over the past fifteen years, the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies has played a major role in promoting knowledge of the Islamic world. Through research, scholarship and debate, it has been a guiding light for those who seek to understand Islam and its rich and varied heritage and to promote a true dialogue of cultures. The Commonwealth Distinguished Visiting Lectureship, established three years ago, plays an increasingly important role in this dialogue and I am pleased to learn that this year's Commonwealth Visiting Lecturer will be Mrs Sonia Gandhi.

Next year, the Rhodes Trust will be celebrating its first centenary. Throughout its history, the Trust has allowed thousands of students, many of them from Commonwealth countries, to come to Oxford and to go on, in Cecil Rhodes' own words, to 'improve the lot of mankind and work towards maintaining peace between nations'. Many Rhodes scholars have worked to promote the values of tolerance and solidarity which are truly at the heart of the Rhodes vision.

Today more than ever before, the concept of a global village reflects reality. In our shrinking and increasingly multicultural world, and in the age of the Internet and satellite communications, we are in constant contact with people who look different, dress differently, eat different food, hold different beliefs and follow different traditions. More people today have the opportunity to choose where they want to live and work, but they often have to adapt to ways of life very different from their own.

Governments too have to develop policies which are suited to pluralistic societies, ensuring that the rights of every group are respected, and upholding values of tolerance, equality and individual freedoms. Even companies are increasingly sensitive to cultural differences. A good example of what happens when they're not is the attempt by a car manufacturer to sell to the Spanish a vehicle called 'Nova'. The company managers couldn't understand why the car, which had sold very well in every other country, did not find any buyers in Spain. Until it was

pointed out to them that No va in Spanish means: ‘doesn’t go’—not a very good name for a car.

These changes have transformed the way we perceive ourselves, both as individuals and as members of communities. We are aware, more than ever before, that our own culture is only one among many and that some of our most strongly held beliefs are not necessarily shared by everyone.

So diversity is part of the fabric of our lives. But many still find it difficult to adapt to pluralistic societies. They see diversity as a threat rather than an opportunity, something they should fear, rather than something they can accept.

Some have argued that diversity, far from being an opportunity for mutual enrichment, can be a source of conflict and that we are heading for what Samuel Huntington described as a ‘clash of civilizations’. The horrific events of 9/11 in New York, and now—eerily—of 10/12 in Bali, have swelled the ranks of the prophets of civilizational conflict. This view is both misguided and dangerous. It is absurd to reduce people’s complex identities to a set of rigid categories. People talk glibly about the ‘Western civilization’, or the ‘Hindu civilization’, or the ‘Islamic civilization’ as if each of these is a sharply defined entity. As a Kiwi I can tell you that there are cultural differences between Australia and New Zealand, not to mention between France and New Zealand, or the United States and New Zealand, though we are all supposed to be part of the ‘West’. Likewise, if Islamic civilization was a monolith, why would Bangladesh have broken away from Pakistan and why do Sunnis and Shias often emphasize their differences?

The fact is that no basis for grouping people, be it geography, religion, ethnicity or language, is the only way of defining who we are. As Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has pointed out, our nationality, our occupation, where we live, the language we speak, the political parties we support, all contribute greatly to making us who we are.

In order to fully understand the challenge of cultural diversity today, we therefore need to go beyond the idea of a ‘clash of civilizations’; we need a broader perspective. It is this wider view I would like to explore with you today. I would like to do this by making three simple points:

1. We can and will benefit from multiculturalism. Because we can all learn from one another, we are all better off living in diverse, pluralistic societies.
2. Global issues and differences are best resolved multilaterally.
3. Managing diversity successfully is not just about politics; it is also about social and economic development.

I will also point out as we go along how organizations like the Commonwealth are well placed to promote these objectives.

Multiculturalism in the Commonwealth

I strongly believe that living in multicultural societies can be a source of enrichment for everyone. But embracing diversity places strong demands on us:

First, we must respect cultures different from our own and learn to recognize every person's humanity in the very fact that they are different. This vision is central to Islam, as it is to most religious traditions. Indeed, the Holy Qur'an recognizes human diversity as one of the Signs of God and therefore, as something which needs to be respected: 'Among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know' (30: 22). But embracing diversity in this way is not always easy. It means that on matters which are fundamental to us—religion, education, relationships, the family—there will be different perspectives and that these will need to be resolved through dialogue, rational debate, and a lot of patience. Diversity is not just about Benetton ads; it's not just about young people of all races holding hands and smiling at each other. Diversity confronts us with difficult issues and hard choices.

Second, we must recognize that no one—no culture, no nation, no religion—has a monopoly over truth. However strongly we believe in our own values, we have to accept that others hold different beliefs from our own and that they deserve our respect, even if we do not agree with them. Tolerance is fundamental to a stable and prosperous world.

Third, we must acknowledge that we can all learn from one another. We can all benefit from the experience and wisdom of other cultures. To reject this would mean living in silos, building brick walls around increasingly small groups and generating more resentment and mistrust, beyond those walls.

But for true dialogue, we have to go beyond tolerance and respect. We must genuinely engage with each other. This form of constructive engagement between cultures is central to the work of the Commonwealth. With its 1.7 billion people representing almost every religion, every ethnic and cultural group in the world, the Commonwealth is a flourishing example of multiculturalism in action.

And Islam plays an essential part in that engagement. There are approximately 500 million Muslims who are Commonwealth citizens, between one-fourth and one-third of the total population. Muslims are therefore an integral and vital part of Commonwealth diversity. They add to our commonwealth and to the organization's weight on the international scene. Muslims also play a key role in strengthening the network of cooperation and partnerships that lies at the heart of the Commonwealth venture. The Commonwealth is not merely a

juxtaposition of nations or even of different cultural and religious communities. It is a global forum for sharing ideas, exchanging knowledge, and establishing a cultural dialogue among equal partners.

The Commonwealth network comes alive in the efforts of thousands of individuals who, through their knowledge and expertise, help others in the Commonwealth achieve growth, strengthen their political institutions, and enrich their communities. Of course, we still have a long way to go in bringing the most disadvantaged in the Commonwealth into this dialogue of cultures. For those with limited education opportunities and no access to electricity, computers, and the Internet, contact with other civilizations is often a remote reality. This is why fighting poverty and providing growth opportunities are so crucial to the work we do.

The power of multilateralism

The Commonwealth not only brings together individuals and communities into fruitful partnerships, it also facilitates dialogue between nations and governments. One of the key assets of the Commonwealth is its capacity to bring about consensus among a diversity of nations. In an increasingly interdependent world, collective decision-making for the collective good is the only way forward. The more we are connected to others, the less we can afford to ignore their needs and interests.

Today, events taking place in one part of the world can have cascading effects on the rest of the planet. Financial markets collapsing in one region of the world can trigger a recession on another continent. The decision to lower interest rates in one country could mean less buying power for pensioners in another. The pollution we produce can affect the living standards of people in faraway countries.

In order to manage this interdependence, decisions which have a global impact must be taken at a global level. No country can achieve its international objectives by going it alone. Decisions taken unilaterally may sometimes seem to work in the short term, but are unsustainable in the long run.

In a world where there is a multiplicity of actors, it is crucial that every voice is heard. As long as we only hear part of the story, we are going to get only part of the solution. And no global problem can be solved by ignoring the voice of the poor and the vulnerable.

This is why the decision-making process best suited to our hyper-connected world is multilateralism. Literally, multilateralism means 'many sides'. It implies that there are many ways of looking at one issue and that decisions must take into account the position of everyone involved. Multilateralism offers the best way of dealing with global problems because it ensures all views are given a hearing and no nation is excluded from the global

decision-making process.

This is precisely why an organization like the Commonwealth, where all member countries sit at the table as equals, can play an important role in resolving conflicts and fostering dialogue between nations. Contrary to what happens in many other organizations—including the United Nations, which is the ultimate forum for multilateral diplomacy—decisions in the Commonwealth are reached not through a voting procedure, but through consensus.

The advantages are clear: a consensus is an inclusive process, where every voice is heard and no voice has more weight than the others; and, because they carry the support of all participants, decisions reached through consensus usually have more chances of being implemented than those arrived at through a majority vote. In a vote, the result excludes the voice of the minority. When you vote, you can't meet half way. If the options are 'yellow' and 'red', the result can only be one or the other. It can't be 'orange'.

But the politics of consensus also has its drawbacks. Achieving a consensus can take time and requires patience. It can be a difficult and painful process. Because no single voice can win the day, it often makes many people unhappy. The 'least common denominator' approach could make the outcome appear weak and watered down. But this is a price usually worth paying for the sake of inclusivity. A consensus is more likely to be the true voice of diversity.

A good example of this is the way Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Australia last March arrived at a consensus on action to be taken in relation to the situation in Zimbabwe. They collectively agreed to constitute a troika made up of the present, past, and future Commonwealth Chairpersons-in-Office (the Australian Prime Minister John Howard, the South African President Thabo Mbeki, and the Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo) to determine appropriate action on Zimbabwe following the report of the Commonwealth Observer Group on the Presidential Election. We were flayed by the media for inaction, for brushing things under the carpet. But less than two weeks later, when following the results of the Zimbabwe elections that country was suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth for one year by the troika, the same media showered the Commonwealth with rare praise!

The Commonwealth can by no means claim to have resolved the Zimbabwe issue—indeed there have been many setbacks. But it is the only globally representative organization that, despite the setbacks, continues to remain engaged. Two things are certain. Unilateral approaches will not help you on Zimbabwe. Nor will any multilateral approach based on 'yes' and 'no' votes.

Consensus was also at the heart of the statement issued by Commonwealth leaders last year calling for resolute action against terrorist activities. This statement goes very far. It does not merely condemn acts of terrorism. It establishes that any member country that supports terrorists is in violation of the fundamental values of the Commonwealth and has no place in

our organization.

At their meeting in Australia, Commonwealth Heads of Government also agreed on a Plan of Action against Terrorism focusing on how to help member states, particularly smaller states, fulfil their international obligations in fighting terrorism, including those provided for by UN Security Council Resolution 1373.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on the Harare Declaration, otherwise known as CMAG, offers another illustration of multilateralism in action. During their Retreat at Millbrook in 1995, Commonwealth Heads of Government collectively agreed to surrender part of their sovereignty in adopting the Millbrook Action Programme, which inter alia established a group of eight Foreign Ministers, convened by the Secretary-General, to act as the custodians of the Harare Principles.

Even ten years ago it was inconceivable that any government could agree to being reprimanded by an international body of which they were a member, on matters which could hitherto escape scrutiny under the protection of 'sovereignty' and 'internal affairs'. CMAG is therefore eloquent testimony to what true multilateralism can achieve.

Multilateralism and the global economy

Multilateralism is not only a valuable mechanism for consensus at political and diplomatic levels. It is also an effective tool for tackling economic disparities and deprivation. If we are serious about eradicating poverty, fighting disease, opening the doors of learning, and providing economic opportunities to everyone on the planet, we must ensure that every voice is heard in global economic forums and that the interests of the vulnerable are not excluded from discussions affecting their future.

In particular, arrangements for global economic governance must be made more accountable and inclusive. The IMF is one of the key governance bodies in this context. But as Joseph Stiglitz argues in his book *Globalization and its Discontents*, 'The IMF . . . affects the lives of billions throughout the developing world; yet they have little say in its actions.' While African countries account for about one fourth of the IMF's membership, they hold only 4 per cent of the vote. That is not democratic multilateralism. In the trade area, the 'Quad'—the United States, Europe, Canada, and Japan—have, until now, dominated multilateral trade negotiations. There are encouraging signs that the current round of negotiations initiated in Doha will mark a sea change by incorporating a 'development agenda'. But the success of the Doha Round will need to be judged on the outcomes it delivers.

Announcements of increases in aid earlier this year have also been encouraging. But aid alone will not lift developing countries out of poverty. It will help them evolve better economic

policies and develop their capacity to compete in the global economy, but these efforts will remain fruitless if wealthy nations continue to impose high tariffs and non-tariff barriers on competitive products from the developing world. Providing aid without the freedom to trade is like giving someone a car, but no license to drive it.

So the message to advanced nations is simple: if you really want to help developing countries, give them access to your markets. This is also the view of the Managing Director of the IMF himself, Horst Köhler: 'protectionism in industrial countries', he says, 'is the core problem in the fight against poverty.' In a recent article, World Bank President James Wolfensohn argues that 'tariffs and quotas for textile exports to developed countries cost developing countries an estimated 27 million jobs. Every textile job in an industrialized country saved by these barriers costs about 35 jobs in these industries in low-income countries, where being a breadwinner literally means putting bread on the table. Meanwhile, in the high income countries, tariffs on food and clothing raise prices, straining the household budgets of low-income families.'

Like trade barriers, agricultural subsidies have a distorting effect on the economy. These amount to US\$1 billion per day, six times the current level of global aid. A recent article in The Guardian provides a striking illustration of the imbalances generated by subsidies: while the average European cow receives \$2.20 a day in subsidies, 2.8 billion people live on less than \$2.00 a day. In other words, for half the world's population, the brutal reality is this: you'd be better off as a European cow.

Significant progress could be achieved if OECD countries substantially reduced subsidies in sectors where developing nations have a competitive advantage. This would also reduce the real cost of certain products to consumers in the developed world and release resources for more productive purposes, thereby increasing the growth potential of developed economies. The World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg last summer goes some way towards addressing these issues. But more should be done, particularly with regard to agreeing to time-bound targets. The consensus reached in Monterrey last March also marked an important step in the process of global development. The challenge is now to deliver on the promises made at Monterrey and this is why at their recent meeting in London, Commonwealth Finance Ministers agreed on an Action Plan for Delivering the Monterrey Consensus. This Action Plan aims, among other things, at enhancing the participation and representation of developing countries in the international financial institutions and securing agreement to a new approach to debt restructuring.

Another key objective of the Commonwealth is to ensure that the voices of its smaller and more vulnerable members are heard in international forums. That is why we set up a Small States Office to facilitate the representation of some of our smallest member states at the

United Nations in New York. Over the past few years, we have played a crucial role in promoting the interests of small states and contributed to greater international awareness of the particular vulnerabilities of these countries.

We have been helping our smaller member states by providing experts who assist them to formulate and implement trade policy and to pursue their interests more effectively in the process of international trade negotiations. Many of these countries are facing a significant deterioration in their development prospects. Key sectors like bananas, financial services, and now sugar production are being undermined by WTO and OECD decisions.

It is therefore critical that creative ways are found to address the endowed handicaps experienced by small states. Historically, this was done through trade preferences, but these are now being eroded. We, in the Commonwealth, are vigorously pursuing market-friendly initiatives to promote private flows to these countries, in close collaboration with a number of multilateral and bilateral partners.

Finally, the Commonwealth has also taken concrete steps to assist Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). It was Commonwealth Finance Ministers who provided the impetus for the multilateral initiative to reduce the debt of HIPC. Today, we continue to maintain pressure on the IMF and the World Bank to provide even greater debt reduction to these countries.

Conclusion

The twentieth century has been one of the bloodiest in the history of humanity: there isn't a single year in the calendar of the twentieth century where one or more nations have not been at war. Perhaps for this reason, much of the history of the past century has been about creating the rules and institutions that would allow nations to live at peace with one another. But until 1990 the wars of the twentieth century were about superpower rivalry, strategic control, military supremacy, spheres of influence and economic domination. The conflicts of the twenty-first century are about more primordial differences—religion, ethnicity, language. Atavistic feelings of 'other-ness' have overshadowed a world which has in many other ways come together in the proverbial global village.

Today, our challenge, therefore, is not just to complete that search for mechanisms to maintain peace started by previous generations, but to bridge human divides and create a genuine global community. For this to happen, we must recognize that diversity is God's gift to the earth, not its nemesis, and that only collective approaches to problem solving can work. Consensus is the safest and most efficient mechanism to achieve stability and manage relations between nations. By using the power of consensus, the Commonwealth can contribute to create the conditions for a just, coherent, and sustainable global diplomacy. It

can help develop a vision of cooperation and partnership between nations. A vision which recognizes that the way to a better future is through solidarity, not isolation, responsibility, not indifference. A vision which encourages us to move away from the dead-end of unilateralism to the fruitful deliberations of multilateralism, to replace the monologues of the powerful with a genuine dialogue between equal partners.