

Community of Democracies Workshop Durban 4 February 2004

Perspective of a Political Party Foundation

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Ladies and Gentlemen

‘Democracy is not something Governments should bother about.’

I shall not attribute that quotation; but it was said to me by the leader of a Western democracy foundation (not represented here) last week. It may seem to be a provocative view; but it is important to understand that perspective. It was I believe a way of saying that democracy promotion is the business of the civil society community and perhaps of political parties, but certainly not of governments themselves.

I profoundly disagree with that view, and I signed up to presenting at this workshop because I believe the Community of Democracies initiative is a timely and appropriate response to the need for Governments to act together in the promotion of democracy across the world.

I should make it clear at the outset that I believe the CD initiative is fundamentally about Governments and what they can do together. The role of the NGO community in relation to this should be limited to supporting, encouraging and lobbying for governments to take up the initiative. It should resist the temptation to develop a life of its own. There are existing mechanisms for this, notably the one we are taking part in here in Durban. There is no need for another.

I want to do two things in this brief contribution to the workshop:

1. Offer a ‘short history of time’ as far as the Community of Democracies is concerned. I should say at the outset that this will be a highly subjective view from someone who has not been close to it for very long; but it may serve as a short-cut to some of the issues for those of you who have been less engaged in the process.
2. Then I want to offer a model of an existing international agency from which the Community of Democracies initiative might draw.

So, first, what has been happening in this extended process of conception of the CD?

- The first assumption to get clear is that birth has not yet taken place. There is energy, there is commitment, there is certainly a strong rationale; but this initiative has not yet turned into a creature. It does not yet exist. It could be well on the way to doing so,

but only if it goes about it the right way, and there is now a real risk of its being still born.

- The idea was germinated several years ago somewhere not very far from Capitol Hill, Washington DC.
- Two meetings have been held, in Warsaw and Seoul, the second being distinguished from the first by the exclusion (on less than transparent criteria) of a number of countries which were not regarded as sufficiently democracy to merit an invitation. Both meetings, I understand, were accompanied by the usual caravan of NGOs doing the things NGOs do from the margins.
- Both meetings ended with ambitious declarations not backed by practical proposals to enable the project to get off the ground, notably the provision of any resources.
- However, this has enabled the concept to be promulgated that over 100 countries are engaged in the process. In practice a convening group of 13 countries are the only ones moving this forward.
- They have done so thus far by beginning to articulate a number of roles for CD including, for example, the establishment of a democracy caucus at the United Nations.
- The process is supported by a group of NGOs, most of them Washington based, recently joined by some Latin American agencies, notably Participa led by Andrea Sanhueza and Genaro Arriagada.
- Participa has, bravely, taken on the role of organizing the next Community of Democracies meeting in Santiago, Chile, scheduled for March 2005.
- In preparing for Santiago, Participa is set itself the ambition of establishing a network of regional groupings: In Latin America, in Europe and elsewhere. This ambition made significant progress at the recent meeting in Lisbon. While providing a mechanism for growing the network in support of CD, this approach also provides a means of de-Americanising the initiative. That ambition is, as I understand from my discussions with the American agencies involved, supported as strongly by them as by others.
- It is widely recognized that Santiago has to demonstrate some practical progress if the whole initiative is to survive. It has to achieve, or make visible progress towards, a birth. An organization has soon to be created between governments.
- My own organization (which is an independent UK agency sponsored by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office) has recently made a small grant to Participa to signal its support for the initiative. I should stress that this was a decision of the Foundation's Board not of the FCO.

Let me now move on to offer a model based on an existing international organization which may be relevant to the issues which the CD currently faces. My own view is that the central issue which has to be addressed is that of the membership rules of this club. The CD must formulate a mechanism, however imprecise it may be, for defining which countries qualify for membership, what enables others to be admitted and what circumstances require that members are suspended or removed.

One of the organizations which has made most progress in this area is the Commonwealth. Now, I would ask you to suspend for a moment your preconceptions of the Commonwealth as a remnant of empire or of a network of ill assorted countries whose membership is determined by historical accident. I am not offering you a commercial on the Commonwealth; I am highlighting a number of the characteristics of the modern Commonwealth which have enabled it to make some, albeit sometimes faltering, progress in defining its own role as a club of democracies.

The key characteristics are these:

- Over time the Commonwealth has developed its own statements of the values and principles to which all its members sign up. The Singapore Declaration of 1971 and the Harare Declaration of 1991 were the significant steps in this process. The existence of a democratically elected government is at the heart of these declarations.
- This rule is applied in practice, and it follows literally as night follows day. When democratically elected governments are overthrown by dictators, that country is immediately suspended from the Commonwealth. This happened to Pakistan in 1999, and more recently to Fiji and Zimbabwe (the Zimbabwe story has other dimensions to it, most recently the decision of the Mugabe Government to leave the Commonwealth at the time of the Abuja summit last December).
- In 1995, at the Auckland summit, the Commonwealth equipped itself with a mechanism to monitor the actions of its member Governments. In what was known as the Millbrook Action Plan a Ministerial Action Group was established. This has ten member countries, appointed in turn by the CHOGM. This is the group which is mandated to monitor progress and changing circumstances.
- The fourth characteristic of the Commonwealth is of course that it has a budget, which enables it to employ a significant staff, to implement the decisions of Governments and CHOGMs.
- This budget also supports other programmes: the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, the Commonwealth of Learning and the Commonwealth Foundation are examples. These budgets give the Commonwealth a life of its own, a role which goes beyond simply being a club of members which meet certain standards.

- Another characteristic of Commonwealth activity is that its ministers meet from time to time in the wings of meetings of the UN and other international agencies. I would not describe this role as that of a caucus, but it reads across in ways which are not irrelevant to the CD aspiration to be a democracy caucus at the United Nations.
- A word about the membership of the Commonwealth: in terms of the contemporary world it makes no rational sense. But the significant relevance to CD is that its membership spans the main regional groupings. It includes large and small, developing and developed and old and new democracies.
- The Commonwealth has developed over time in a way which reflects the messy ebbs and flows of international relations. It goes without saying that this has not been a simple linear process.
- Most of all: the Commonwealth, for all its imperfections, provides a setting in which member governments, and particularly their heads, can work together in a way which can build trust, which enables them to understand each others' interests personally and which has the capacity to develop over time. As its best it is a living creature which can grow and develop over time.

In all these characteristics I believe the Commonwealth offers a model from which the CD initiative may wish to learn.

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