



Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting Opening Ceremony
Remarks by Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma
Botswana
5 May 2014

Vice-President, Minister of Defence, Justice and Security, Honourable Ministers, Attorneys-General, Distinguished Representatives of Governments and Judiciaries, Delegates and Senior Officials, Commonwealth Friends...

It is indeed a pleasure to greet you as we celebrate our coming together this evening. I thank you for your participation, and offer most sincere thanks to our hosts, the government and people of Botswana for their warm welcome. We are deeply grateful to the Honourable Minister for Defence, Justice and Security and to the Attorney-General of Botswana for their care and co-operation in planning and chairing this meeting.

It is good to see the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting back in Africa - it was last held here almost ten years ago in Accra, Ghana, in 2005. Since then there have been the meetings of 2008 in Edinburgh, UK, and of 2011 in Sydney, Australia. The wide geographical range of these locations shows the truly global reach of the Commonwealth, and gives a sense of the rich diversity that is embraced whenever and wherever our Commonwealth ministerial meetings take place. The Commonwealth indeed has no centre and no periphery: where it meets is its heart. That heart beats strongest tonight here in Botswana.

We can rightly feel a sense of achievement when we reflect on the innovative work and co-operation between our member states on so many crucial aspects of justice, jurisprudence, and the rule of law - and above all on the separation of powers, which is central to our Commonwealth understanding of how democracy, development, and respect for diversity are protected and advanced.

The links that allow such rich and mutually beneficial collaboration to flourish extend beyond intergovernmental relationships. There is extensive contact at many levels in the field of law within the Commonwealth; shared affiliations spread wide and common traditions run deep. Our task is to build on the best of those traditions, and on that spirit of co-operation: they have given us much that we recognise and cherish as being distinctive to the Commonwealth. The practical impact of this was exemplified in the way in which four Commonwealth civil society organisations working together – the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, Commonwealth Legal Education Association, Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association, and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association – were instrumental in giving us the Latimer House Principles. We are pleased that their representatives are here and we extend a special welcome to them.

The Commonwealth Charter – adopted in 2012 by our Heads of Government on behalf of the people of The Commonwealth – gives renewed emphasis and clarity to our collective purpose,

to which shared commitment to upholding the rule of law and protecting the rights and freedoms of our citizens is fundamental. These two bedrock values are brought together in the theme for this meeting: 'Consolidating the Rule of Law and Human Rights in The Commonwealth'. Our task is to convert the will of our Commonwealth citizens and governments, as expressed in the Charter, into practical and tangible progress. This will give life, substance and relevance to the Charter and to our work in the communities we serve worldwide. Through our Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division, soon to be known as the Rule of Law Division, we at the Commonwealth Secretariat stand ready to offer any assistance we can, including on judicial education and the independence of the judiciary; access to justice and alternative dispute resolution; reforms to criminal justice systems; international co-operation in criminal matters; legislative support; and law reforms to support sustainable development and economic growth.

Ministerial meetings are 'booster stations' as we move forward together and build for the future; they deepen the mutually supportive and practical partnerships that are the very essence of The Commonwealth connection.

A significant challenge we face is how to maintain interconnection and a sense of pan-Commonwealth collaboration during the period between meetings. This is true of all our ministerial gatherings, even if the pattern and regularity vary. In the compacting and ever more closely connected world of today it is vital that our interaction should not be episodic, nor be limited simply to what can be driven forward by the Secretariat. Increasingly, 'Commonwealth Connects' - our cloud-based online platform, which many of you have used as you have prepared for this gathering - can help us to access resources and maintain links and contact between our meetings so that work begun and goals agreed can be pursued more effectively and collaboratively. 'Commonwealth Connects' provides secure workspaces where officials, practitioners, and other professional and academic partners can transact and work together in real time. This means that we are now able to convene wider ranges of experience and practical expertise to assist us in advancing our work on particular topics and in specific areas of need. It will allow for co-operation begun before meetings to be continued during and carried forward afterwards. Digital connectivity supplements rather than supplants the valuable business undertaken when we meet at regular gatherings such as this; it opens up new horizons for mutually rewarding partnership and development through intra-Commonwealth links and mutual support. We are also working to ensure that our member countries have the necessary ICT capacities to benefit from such initiatives where needed.

It is by continuing to work together in this inclusive way, over the coming days and into the future, that we shall equip ourselves – individually and collectively – to overcome new and emerging challenges. Constructive exchange of ideas and practice with others in The Commonwealth family can assist us all towards developing and adopting effective, innovative, and equitable approaches that answer the contemporary needs of our citizens.

In the days ahead, I hope that all distinguished guests will have the opportunity not only to contribute and to benefit from this valuable networking opportunity – which is the lifeblood of The Commonwealth – but also to see something of Botswana as we were just now urged. The Commonwealth Secretariat itself is active in a variety of ways – from our provision of regional trade capacity-building at the Southern African Development Community located in this city, to our newly-established African Anti-Corruption Centre here. We are present; we are active; and we seek to work both with vision and with practical tool kits in our hands.