

INTRODUCTION

The Second Meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders opened in Colombo exactly two years after the first Meeting in Ocho Rios, Jamaica.

The Ocho Rios Meeting had issued the "Declaration of Commonwealth Youth"- an affirmation of youth's desire to participate fully in national development. The meeting was unique, not only as a first in Commonwealth history, but it was the first time an international agency had convened a meeting comprised solely of young leaders to discuss matters of major concern to their lives. To be sure, meetings on "youth participation" had been held, but these had convened not only young leaders but a preponderance of senior government officials and academics with an interest in "youth research".

In order to build on the spirit engendered by the Ocho Rios Meeting, the Commonwealth Youth Programme began to plan a follow-up. A meeting of the Programme's governing council in Ottawa in 1978 agreed that the second meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders should proceed. The council in itself had been unique: each Commonwealth government had been invited to send two delegates - the second to be under 25. These young delegates put the case forcefully for a second meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders. They agreed that the meeting should address itself to one of the gravest problems facing the young - youth unemployment.

It was decided that the meeting's theme should encompass both youth unemployment, and those international conditions that rendered national planning impotent and with it, concerted and continuing programmes to overcome youth unemployment. Therefore, the meeting was seen as a key link between the feelings of the young - seeking successful national development - and Commonwealth government leaders who increasingly viewed the Commonwealth as an association which could campaign effectively for a New International Economic Order.

Young Leaders in Sri Lanka

In accepting the Government of Sri Lanka's offer to host the meeting in Colombo, the organisers were particularly mindful of the strides made by Sri Lanka in youth leadership and in programmes to overcome youth unemployment.

In December 1978, the Government of Sri Lanka had renamed its youth ministry the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Employment - thus tying in both themes of youth in development and youth unemployment. The 29-year old barrister and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hon. Ranil Wickremasinghe, became Minister of Youth Affairs and Employment.

The involvement of young leaders was also exemplified in the composition of the National Youth Service Council which acted as an executive agency of the Ministry. The direction and everyday management of the NYSC encompassed not only large-scale public works development projects, but small-scale self-employment programmes - all complete with training components.

In August 1979, three months after the Second Meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders, the Sri Lankan Prime Minister attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka, with Ranil Wickremasinghe heading the remainder the delegation - which also included Charitha Ratwatte, Chairman of the NYSC, and the local organiser for the Second Meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders.

Opening Ceremony at the Bandaranaike Hall

The opening ceremony for the Second Meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders, at which the Sri Lankan Prime Minister and the Assistant Commonwealth Secretary-General spoke, was held on the morning of 3 May, at the Bandaranaike International Conference Centre. A contingent of Sri Lankan drummers, dancers and singers formed the guard of honour for the 51 delegates from 28 countries, and their guests from the Sri Lankan Parliament and the diplomatic community.

The Meeting

In welcoming the delegates to the Colombo meeting, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Hon. R. Premadasa, outlined the challenge they faced: "You delegates, have recognised, from bitter experience, that the achievement of economic independence has been retarded, if not thwarted, by external economic factors beyond your control."

He described the threefold task of the meeting: "The first is to evaluate the economic policies of national governments and identify the factors and areas in which they have failed to respond to the needs and aspirations of the people, particularly those of the youth. The second is to analyse as to what extent this failure has been the result of external economic factors beyond the control of national governments; and the third, to see what constructive role the youth in these countries could play to bring about those changes which will lead to the improvement of the physical quality of life of the people and usher in a new order based on equity and social justice."

The Assistant Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Professor K.S. Murshid, also spoke. He saw the meeting providing fresh thought which could assist and guide Commonwealth Governments. "Fresh and youthful infusions of power," he said, "are necessary to reorder our tragic world".

Over the following two days, the delegates were addressed by the Hon. Lalith Athulathmudali, Sri Lankan Minister of Trade and Shipping, the Hon. Hugh Small, Jamaican Minister of Youth, Sports and Community Development, and the Hon. Ali Mchumo, Tanzanian Minister of State for Home Affairs.

The three speakers had special qualifications. Themselves young Ministers, they were also involved directly in the struggle for successful national development in the face of international economic conditions. The Hon. Lalith Athulathmudali spoke on the eve of his departure to UNCTAD V in Manila, where he was to play a major role representing the Group of 77. The Hon. Hugh Small spoke from Jamaica's recent experience of attempting to pursue an independent national development in the face of conditionality imposed by the IMF. The Hon. Ali Mchumo spoke from the peculiar vantage point of a nation that had pursued its own course as a matter of hard-won principle.

The speeches were followed by two days of discussions in two separate commissions, a cultural excursion to Kandy, and a final plenary at which a Final Statement was agreed.

The Speeches

The Hon. Lalith Athulathmudali spoke about "Youth Unemployment and its place as a compelling issue in the North/South Dialogue". Recalling an example which linked the two, he said:

"I remember a Minister in a developed country with whom I once negotiated a textile agreement saying to me that in his country unemployment will go up from 7% to 8% if there was no restriction imposed on exports of the developing countries. I said to him in reply that, if the export was allowed, unemployment in my country would go down from 22% to 19% and that an 8% unemployment, which he feared so much for his country, was to me more a solution than a problem".

The Hon. Hugh Small argued that only fundamental changes in the international economic order would prevent the continuing deterioration in the employment prospects of young people in developing countries. The young, he said, live in "a different historic stage from that in which their parents were born... This generation will not be deluded by the symbols of sovereignty and political independence. They understand the nature of the new colonialism and life itself has taught them to look behind the symbols of nationhood at the reality of the economic relations in which their countries are trapped." Today's youth, he continued, had great concerns. The objectives of peace, national independence, territorial integrity, equality among nations and the sovereign right of nations to self-determination and to freedom and justice, were all in the minds of young people: "We are suggesting that the New International Economic Order constitutes a concrete and constructive articulation of these widespread concerns among today's youth."

Mr Small outlined six "fundamental changes" which ought to be made to the international economic system. These were in the fields of:

- (a) Commerce: where increases in the price and volume of Third World exports were required.
- (b) Aid and external indebtedness: where cancellation or rescheduling of a great proportion of the Third World's debts were required.
- (c) Technology: where the transfer of technology required an international code of conduct, and national sovereignty over natural resources needed to be fully recognised.
- (d) Foreign exchange: where improved access by the Third World to international liquidity was required.
- (e) Regional cooperation: where joint schemes for collective self reliance were required.
- (f) Discrimination: where discrimination in trade required to be ended involving all countries in the international division of labour.

The theme of "fundamental change" was taken up by the Hon. Ali Mchumo. This change required to be made both within individual societies and among societies. Youth unemployment, he said, was one manifestation of under-development. In order to combat under-development on a national level, he proposed five major requirements:

- (a) National economies required to be changed from export-oriented outposts of the metropolitan countries to self-sustaining units.

(b) Dynamic rural development policies were required, with the development of proper rural infra-structures.

(c) Changes in the educational system were required to meet true national manpower requirements.

(d) Progressive policy in the utilisation and development of technology was required.

(e) The New International Economic Order was required, in order that the four previous steps should not be arrested in mid-flight.

The Commissions

The three speakers were closely questioned on their speeches. The themes they had introduced were then further debated in two commissions. The first of these dealt with national strategies against youth unemployment. The other considered the international backdrop.

The unemployment commission was chaired by the Hon. James McLay, New Zealand Minister of Justice; and the international commission by the Hon. Ms. Datin P. Rafidah Aziz, Malaysian Deputy Minister of Finance. Delegates were further helped in their deliberations by two background papers prepared by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

International Commission

The Chair for the international commission, the Hon. Datin P. Rafidah Aziz, emphasized that much sloganeering had emerged from previous discussions on the North/South dialogue and the search for a New International Economic Order. In order that the Second Meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders did not fall into the same trap, she proposed discussion along two lines:

(a) Putting forward proposals to those authorities capable and competent of acting upon them; in the case of the Commonwealth these would include the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and the Commonwealth Youth Programme.

(b) Delineating action the delegates could themselves take, back in their own countries.

The Commission approached its subject under nine headings: multi-national corporations; international development education; aid; reform of the IMF; the transfer of technology; access to markets for the products of developing countries; debt relief; the development of small-scale industry; and those political constraints which made the full development of a New International Economic Order impossible, including the institutionalised racism of Southern Africa - whereby whole peoples, within the region and in the surrounding countries, were denied full access to regional development.

Youth Unemployment

The commission on youth unemployment in individual Commonwealth countries discussed numerous strategies which had been implemented to combat youth unemployment. They urged Governments to recognise the full role young people can play - not only in projects and programmes of development, but in planning and policy development. As young people, and some of those present had themselves endured lengthy periods of unemployment.

Discussion focussed on six major groupings: the development of education to meet manpower requirements; population control; the attraction and development of new industries, as well as traditional industries and those using appropriate technology; the positive contribution of trades unions; special youth initiative schemes; rural youth programmes; and, in developed countries, youth opportunities schemes, which were able to provide combinations of work experience, training and job-seeking skills.

Final Statement

The nine groupings of the international commission and the six of the unemployment session were used to develop those items introduced by the speakers and the background papers. Debate was, at all times, lively. Commonwealth Secretariat rapporteurs attended each commission and produced full summaries of discussion to their commissions before they closed. The summaries, duly amended, were then presented to a steering group of young leaders - from Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Jamaica, and Zambia - under the chairmanship of the Conference Chairman.

A draft for plenary debate of the Final Statement was prepared while delegates were away from Colombo on their cultural excursion to Kandy. After the final plenary considered carefully the draft statement, amendments were incorporated into the document that follows.

Impact

It is not possible, at this stage, to judge whether the Second Meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders was a success. It was, to the extent that the Sri Lankan hosts provided superb facilities backed up by first-class administrative support. Also, it was a success to the extent that views and opinions were freely exchanged in an atmosphere which was frank but without rancour. But a true assessment of the Colombo meeting must measure its success in advancing the cause of the New International Economic Order, and decide whether its deliberations have increased pressure to contain and reduce youth unemployment.

The Colombo meeting must be seen as one event of many designed to create the political will for action among decision-makers, and to provide them with relevant ideas. Therefore, it is hoped that the report will be regarded as a force in the struggle to extricate the world economy from its present predicament.

Those who read this report will know where the Young Leaders stand on the issues it tackles. The Young Leaders will be anxious to know if governments agree and, more important, what action they intend to take.