

Chapter 1

Commonwealth Core Democratic Values and Principles

Advancing the culture and institutions of democracy is central to the modern Commonwealth. Respect for democratic good practice, along with universal human rights covenants and instruments, is one of the Commonwealth's core values. It is an indispensable condition of membership.

The practical implications of this commitment have been clarified and deepened over the years, including through the *Singapore Declaration* (1971), the *Harare Declaration* (1991), the *Millbrook Action Programme* (1995), the *Latimer House Principles* (2003), the *Aberdeen Agenda* (2005) and the *Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles* (2009). The most authoritative statement of these commitments, which can be found in the *Charter of the Commonwealth* (2013) stresses the importance of inclusiveness and transparency as core Commonwealth principles.

The Charter, which recognises that there has been a 'surge in popular demands for democracy', commits member countries to 'the *development* of free and democratic societies.' Its objective, clearly, is to encourage this historical trend towards democratic consolidation.

Democracy is an ideal to strive for

Emphasis is placed on the '*development*' of democratic societies because this is not a matter of reaching some arbitrarily fixed benchmark, but a good faith commitment to engage in a journey whose objective is constantly to refine and deepen democratic good practice. It sees democracy as an ongoing process in collective living and institution building.

There are no perfect democracies

No Commonwealth country has reached the end point in its democratic journey. All need to continue the journey. The specific characteristics of each country's democratic arrangements will vary in light of national experience and culture – diversity the Charter celebrates – but they must remain faithful to the Commonwealth's fundamental values and principles.

The popular demand for democratic progress is unstoppable

By characterising in the Charter these popular demands for change as 'surging' – a powerful and evocative idea – the people of the Commonwealth recognise that, in the long run, efforts to suppress legitimate aspirations for fair representation in government or for participation in the political process will eventually be overwhelmed.

Freedom lies at the foundation of democracy

Furthermore, there is a strong focus in the Charter, not just on ‘democracy’, which can wrongly be seen simply as referring to formal structures, but on ‘freedom’, which underlines a potent commitment to human emancipation. Only a free people can be truly democratic.

That freedom clearly implies an unimpeded ability to organise politically, to receive and impart information, and to protest against maladministration and corruption.

True democracy, it is recognised, cannot exist unless people are enabled to exercise their rights within a society that respects the rule of law, and to choose their own leaders. Arbitrary rule by those in authority, or their agents, is the exact opposite of democracy (even if the officials concerned have received an electoral mandate).

Rights are balanced by responsibilities

The freedoms claimed within a democratic society come with a clear set of responsibilities. Democrats must accept that, however committed they are to their own side and however disreputable they believe the opposition to be, the system can only function if they accept an overriding loyalty to the democratic process itself.

Loyal opposition

Democracy means recognising the legitimacy of a government run by political opponents and being willing to wait patiently until the next election. It means fully internalising and accepting the idea of the ‘loyal opposition’. The governing party, in exchange, while striving to accommodate the legitimate interests of the opposition, in order to secure the common good, must accept its right of dissent and even of vociferous opposition.

Good governance

Public service should not be focussed on personal enrichment, but on serving the common good. Although securing political power may traditionally have been an easy and quick route to amassing wealth, this is not the purpose of political leadership and in a Commonwealth community should no longer be the case.

The focus on good governance, which is central to the Charter, is among other things designed to break that link. Politicians should be appropriately remunerated, but must not otherwise use their public position for personal gain. It is essential, therefore, that countries develop a robust and effective anti-corruption architecture.

Participation

The Charter’s preamble talks about free and democratic ‘societies’. This approach, which again is much broader than concern just for the electoral process, points to respect for the role of civil society and the responsibility of Commonwealth governments to encourage and protect the diversity (and sometimes the unruliness) of a free people.

The Commonwealth's commitment to democracy, therefore, involves respect for the 'inalienable right' of individuals to participate not just in elections, but also in democratic processes more broadly.

Creating a democratic culture

According to the Charter, responsibility for upholding and promoting 'democratic culture' rests with governments, political parties and civil society organisations.

This recognises that the ultimate goal of the constitutional order is to produce not only democratic procedures but a democratic 'culture': a culture in which all citizens – whatever their background – can participate and feel that they have a stake; and a culture in which unjust social privileges and oppressive hierarchies are tamed in the interests of social harmony and justice.

Minorities and the marginalised

Democracy resides not only in procedural mechanisms like universal suffrage but also in building a culture of respect for the rights of minorities and the marginalised. The 'dictatorship of the majority', especially when fuelled by exclusive forms of identity politics, has no place in a truly democratic society.

Human rights

A democratic society, with a democratic culture, can only be built on the firm foundation of respect for the 'dignity of all human beings.' Commonwealth countries, therefore, adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights covenants and international instruments. The Charter also envisages all sharing respect for the protection and promotion of:

... civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development, for all without discrimination on any grounds as the foundations of peaceful, just and stable societies.

Member countries may not pick and choose, or mix and match among these rights. As far as the Charter is concerned, they are 'universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated and cannot be implemented selectively'.

Outlawing discrimination

The Commonwealth, through the Charter, not only promotes human rights but also commits governments to eliminating: 'all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief or other grounds'. Gender equality and women's empowerment, in particular, are seen to be: 'essential components of human development and basic human rights'.

Tolerance

Free and democratic societies, precisely because they are free and democratic, must actively promote 'tolerance, respect, understanding, moderation and religious

freedom'. The Commonwealth as a whole, and its individual member countries, are diverse and comprise 'multiple identities'. Positive acceptance of this diversity, and an acceptance that it enriches all, is 'fundamental to the Commonwealth's principles and approach'.

Youth

The future of the Commonwealth, and of its continuing efforts to raise standards of democracy and human rights, will depend on the willingness of young people to promote and sustain Commonwealth values and principles. It is important, therefore, that young people should be given their rightful place in the national life of all Commonwealth countries.

Civil society

The health and dynamism of civil society – that multitude of organisations, autonomous and semi-autonomous, formal and informal, that lie between government and individual citizens and their families – is a significant indication of the quality of a country's democracy.

The Charter provides a clear, comprehensive and unambiguous statement of what the Commonwealth stands for. Civil society organisations and others can use the Charter as a yardstick for evaluating the extent to which their governments, and the constitutional and legal framework under which they operate, meet the basic democratic and human rights standards of the Commonwealth.