

Summary of the Roundtable Discussion on the “Future of the Commonwealth”

The Bangladesh chapter of the Round Table organized a seminar on the “**Future of the Commonwealth**” on Thursday, 20 January 2011, from 3:30 pm to 5:30 pm, at the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute conference room.

Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser for International Affairs to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, was the Chief Guest at the seminar. **Ambassador Farooq Sobhan**, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, and member of the International Advisory Board of the Round Table, chaired the seminar.

Dr. Venkat Iyer, Editor, The Round Table (UK) was the Guest Speaker. **Mr. Enam Ahmed Choudhury**, President, Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh and **H. E. Dr. Justin Lee**, High Commissioner of Australia, also spoke at the seminar as special guests.

Participants included a former State Minister for Foreign Affairs, executive members of the Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh, senior government officials, representatives of different High Commissions, former Ambassadors, heads of private sector institutions, members of think tanks, academics and members of the local print and electronic media.

The aim of the seminar was to commemorate the centenary of the Round Table journal. Founded in 1910, **The Round Table**, Britain's oldest international affairs journal, provides analysis and commentary on all aspects of international affairs. The journal is the major source of coverage of policy issues concerning the contemporary Commonwealth and its role in international affairs, with occasional articles on themes of historical interest.

Participants raised a number of interesting points during the open floor discussion. They called for transforming Commonwealth into an organization, which in addition to the small states would also take a special interest in assisting member states that were categorized by the UN as Least Developed Countries(LDCs) in keeping with the objectives and principles of the Commonwealth. They also stated that the Commonwealth was dominated by the four developed member states, namely Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. It was suggested that the support extended to the Commonwealth should be more broad based.

The comments and suggestions made by the participants on the seminar may be summarized as follows:

- Dr. Venkat Iyer, editor of ‘The Round Table’ journal, also took part in the discussion. He gave a brief overview of the genesis and functions of ‘The Round Table’.
- Dr. Justin Lee, the Australian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, explained the role of Australia as a member of Commonwealth and spoke of Australia’s effective cooperation with all the countries of the Commonwealth.

- Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser for Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister, said the developed countries of the Commonwealth should ease visa formalities for the students from developing countries and give them the opportunity of higher studies in the developed countries. He said the Commonwealth should play a more effective role in promoting democracy, consensus building, education, economic development and human rights. Dr. Rizvi also said that the Commonwealth was an organization that brings together both developed and developing countries under one umbrella. He added that, the Commonwealth had been playing a very important role in improving social, political and economic conditions of its member countries. He said, “The Commonwealth raises hopes and is able to deliver,” adding that, “it had made a great contribution to creating a strong bond between the North and South and between the rich and poor among the members.”
- Dr. Rizvi also paid a special tribute to the late Dr. Peter Lyon. He commented that soon after arriving at Oxford in 1973, as undergraduate, Peter Lyon had taken him under his wing and became his mentor. Dr. Rizvi said that until his death, Peter and he had remained very close friends. Ambassador Sobhan also paid a warm tribute to Peter Lyon and said that he, too, had been a close friend of Peter.
- Mr. Enam Ahmed Choudhury, President of the Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh, in his speech spoke about the origins of the modern Commonwealth and high-lighted some of its achievements.
- During the open floor discussion, Abul Ahsan Chowdhury, former state minister for Foreign Affairs said, the “Commonwealth has failed to establish itself as a distinct forum like the United Nations and some other international organizations even after having huge potentiality.” He urged the Commonwealth member states to strengthen this intergovernmental organization, so that it could function more effectively as a common platform for all the member states. The Commonwealth he said could also play an important role in helping to resolve the current energy and financial crises faced by many of the member states of the Commonwealth.
- Ms Selina Mohsin, a former Bangladesh High Commissioner to the Maldives and who had also served for several years in the Commonwealth Secretariat, said that the Commonwealth Secretariat was a place that functioned in a bureaucratic manner although the objective of forming the Secretariat was to establish democracy, good governance and human rights. Moreover, the Secretariat had failed to show any kind of accountability, she added.
- Some of the other speakers said that the Commonwealth had gradually been losing its relevance in recent years because it had not been vocal enough in extending support to member states and in upholding the Harare principles. They also suggested that one of the critical areas, where the Commonwealth could provide more assistance to member countries was, in the area of climate change.

- The meeting concluded with Ambassador Sobhan making a few final observations. He highlighted the significant role of migrant workers and stressed the importance of safe migration of people within the Commonwealth countries and in the world in general. He also suggested that given the important role played by the Commonwealth in supporting free and fair elections and in sending election observers, that a permanent election Commission for the Commonwealth should be established, with a panel of permanent election commissioners, to observe polls in member states.
- Finally, Ambassador Sobhan observed that the Secretariat was heavily dependent on funding from Britain, Australia and Canada and suggested that if the Commonwealth was to increase its activities and provide more assistance to member states then it was essential for countries such as India, Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa, among others, to increase their financial contribution to the Commonwealth Secretariat.

[Link to the UK Round Table Website](#)