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CULTURES OF DEMOCRACY

COMMONWEALTH LEADERSHIP, GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM
AND PEOPLE EMPOWERMENT IN TIMES OF CRISIS

CONFERENCE REPORT

20-21 NOVEMBER 2025

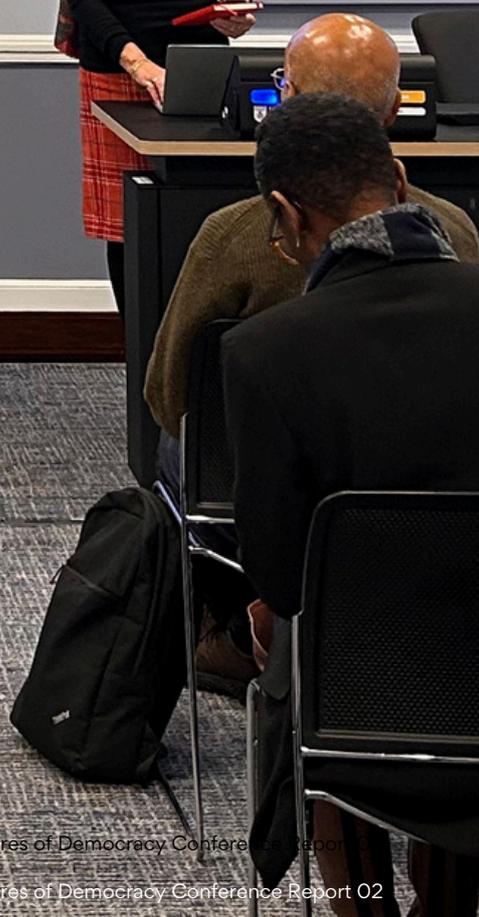
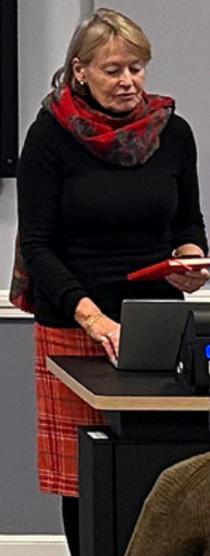


This two-day conference was organised to coincide with two major anniversaries of the Commonwealth of Nations, as highlighted by Kingsley Abbott in his opening remarks.

First, the creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat 60 years ago, which went on to establish a Commonwealth-wide team of diplomats and administrators to oversee programmes and policies and to provide informed insights; and secondly, the Millbrook Action Programme on the Harare Declaration, which set up the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) 30 years ago to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law as well as sanction states found to be in violation of these tenets. But with the advance of far-right and populist regimes in recent years, there have been increasingly blatant displays of transactional diplomacy and attacks (both actual and

contemplated) on international regimes of sovereignty, human rights and the rule of law. While this is not unprecedented, attacks on democratic governance have in recent months benefited from rising disregard for fact-checking, particularly in the age of social media and artificial intelligence. This has highlighted the importance of responsible and accountable reporting, as well as the safeguarding of sites of knowledge production across the world, as a key priority for states, people, and international organisations whose commitment to democracy is primordial.

In this context, the panellists and the audience coming together for this conference, in-person and online, considered a series of vital questions for the Commonwealth as an organisation of states and peoples, looking both at the relevance of programmes and dialogue within the Commonwealth and at the relevance of the Commonwealth itself (state and non-state) on the wide international stage. How well equipped is the Commonwealth to face the multiplicity of challenges posed to a rules based international system? What leadership, or support, can its experience, expertise, institutions and networks provide, to preserve and promote the rule of law, in both domestic contexts and on the international stage?



These issues were discussed over four connected panels.

On day one, the first panel, **'The Commonwealth and Democracy'**, discussed the institutions and underpinnings of democracy across Commonwealth countries, considering in particular the behaviour and impact of the so-called 'mature democracies' of the Commonwealth in a disordered world. Panellists elaborated on our understanding of 'cultures of democracy', beyond simple yardsticks of the existence of legislative and executive institutions, and elections. Using the case study of the Gaza war – the moral issue of our time – James Chiriyankandath interrogated the failure of states to abide by the 2013 Commonwealth Charter. He contrasted South Africa with other founding members of the modern Commonwealth – the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada & New Zealand –, highlighting the ANC government's willingness to risk the wrath of the US and Israel and the increasingly threadbare international order and Charter of values.

He reflected on the ways in which the issue of Gaza has affected democratic culture in the Western world, particularly around freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, and freedom of academia; the application of law against non-violent protest, stressing the deep-seated societal divisions of a broad cross-section of civil society, academia and students who were outraged by the extent of Palestinian civilian suffering, versus the supporters of Israel who had weaponised the charge of 'anti-semitism' to oppose non-violent protest. What did this say about democracy and values versus state interests? What does the Commonwealth's reaction to the Gaza crisis say about the Commonwealth and adherence to the Charter? He stressed that the Charter was as relevant to mature Commonwealth democracies internally, as well as internationally, and governments should recognise this. Similarly, there was a direct connection with the failings of multilateralism and a rules-based international order



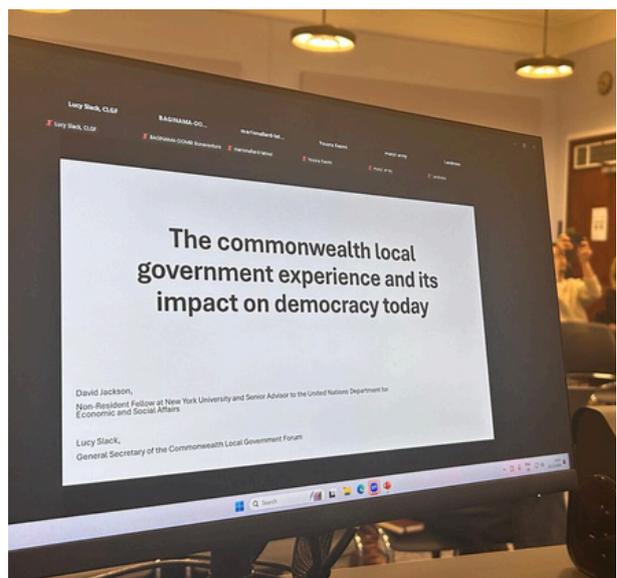
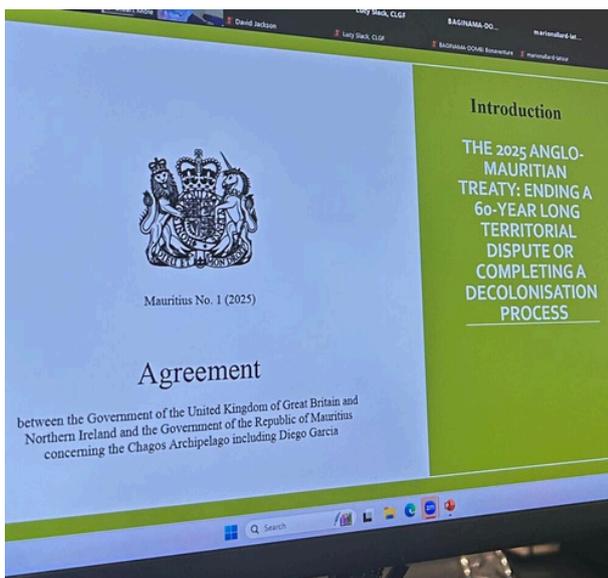
What is truly meant, therefore, by 'democracy'? Consent? Respect for the agency of citizens? The issue of the forms and norms of democracy (and their relative depth within Commonwealth societies) was also addressed by Andrea Sau, Chris Wylde and Kamal Syed, using Marxist class-based analysis. Rather than representing a 'people's Commonwealth', they questioned how far the Commonwealth does in fact encapsulate a trans-national capitalist class (based on leadership), fostered by shared economic and ideological interests driven by economic incentives and political liberalism. Speakers questioned whether the Commonwealth has been and is being used to get small Least Developed Countries 'buy in', using neoliberalism to promote redistribution and state well-being but still in a market economy. It was pointed out that there is barely any mention of workers or union rights in Commonwealth communiqués or the Charter, and that sustainable liberalism benefits capitalization, not workers' rights. Greater efforts should be made to address this.

Past election observation missions in Zimbabwe were also used as a lens to question the independent Commonwealth oversight of democratization. It was stressed that despite the 2018 reforms to the Commonwealth's approach to election observation and the need for ongoing assessment in the election cycle, to be effective Commonwealth Observer Groups (COGs) needed more financial and data resources, and greater collaboration with civil society observers. It was acknowledged that the COGs had been successful in identifying procedural issues and problems, and in recommending improvements in independent election commissions and codes of conduct. However, the Commonwealth lacked effective 'teeth' to ensure that recommended reforms were implemented (for example, the 2018 recommendations for Zimbabwe). Bright Chimedza argued for the Commonwealth to improve its methodology, in collaboration with other observers (eg. the European Union, the African Union, the Southern African Development Community, or the Carter Center), and to ensure that its terminology and use of language was consistently robust.

The Q&A highlighted the role of the judiciary in underpinning democratic cultures and practice. Given the politicisation of the judiciary in a number of Commonwealth countries, there was a real need for consistent and active civil society and trans-national Commonwealth engagement. The Latimer House Principles had been agreed in a more benign international environment and benefited from a high point in democratization and government across Commonwealth countries; calls for their reframing or amendment should be resisted in these times of rising authoritarianism, populist nationalism, and an increasingly frayed international order.



The second panel of the day then turned to examining **'Commonwealth Democratic Values'** in national, pan-Commonwealth and global settings. It opened with Gargi Sakpal, who argued that scholars and practitioners too often adopted narrow definitions of democratic credentials, and failed to give full importance to the protection of citizens' psychological well-being, to the safety and dignity of individuals. Thinking about social and economic democracy sheds light on some of the factors behind institutional distrust. Taking the case of India, Sakpal argued that to understand and remedy mental health crises, it was critical to go beyond medical factors, and consider political, economic and social inequalities, sometimes coupled with surveillance and repression. She called for a "Commonwealth of Care", i.e. one that would make psychosocial well-being a core criterion to assess democratic legitimacy in Commonwealth member states, in line with the commitment of the Commonwealth Charter to human dignity. This would involve a holistic legitimacy index, accountability mechanisms and the creation of a Commonwealth Fund for Participatory and Community Mental Health, focused on citizen-led initiatives and high-vulnerability regions.



The question of political divides was the focus of Shireen Mushtaq, who analysed how generational differences – particularly between Generation Z and Millennials - influence the electoral behaviour of young people in Pakistan in the age of social media and artificial intelligence. Having surveyed over 500 respondents, she indicated that attitudes towards institutional trust, protest effectiveness and algorithmic awareness were largely similar between the two generations, but pointed to important distinctions: Generation Z challenged norms more frequently and showed lower support for military intervention. In other words, there seemed to be a shift towards digital expression, online independence and scepticism of coercive power, which influenced perceptions of legitimacy and authority.

Democracy should also be understood, as Kushboo Mangroo argued, in relation to the right to self-determination. Looking at the 2019 advisory opinion delivered by the International Court of Justice and the 2025 Anglo-Mauritian Treaty, which recognised Mauritian sovereignty on the Chagos Archipelago, she considered the extent to which the Chagossians themselves have been included - or not - in the negotiations. She discussed the role played by individuals, associations and other grassroots movements, political parties and the states. Mangroo considered the influence of United Nations bodies in disputes between Commonwealth member states, the complex positions within the Chagossian diaspora, and the impact of environmental concerns on local and international decisions

Finally, David Jackson and Lucy Slack showed the importance of local government in understanding cultures of democracy. They argued that a “visceral engagement” between the city and the state at local government level could act as a bulwark against autocratic shifts and promote trust in institutions. Looking at local government patterns from the colonial to the contemporary era in a wide range of settings (India, Canada, Malawi), they showed the strength of local democracy, even during periods of autocratic central government. This led them to consider local government finance and fiscal decentralisation, and to reflect on the ability of local governments to influence resource allocation and affect (positively) democratic practices in Commonwealth member countries. In the Q&A, participants discussed the differences between media platforms and the importance of robust, independent, professional journalism; the weight of state sovereignty in the current international system and its impact on self-determination, decision-making processes and consensus building; and the need for the Commonwealth to both maintain and strengthen its focus on youth and youth empowerment. Participants also debated what the generational shifts or the international disputes examined by the speakers meant for Commonwealth institutions, in terms of policy-making or international engagement.



Beyond local government forums, participants discussed the influence of trade unions; they noted that these bodies still tend to be marginalised in academic and policy analysis of the Commonwealth, even though they are a crucial training and testing ground for democracy.



Day 2 opened with Matthew Neuhaus's keynote lecture, **'Reinforcing Democracy? The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) 30 Years on'**¹. Now honorary professor at the ANU College of Law, Matthew Neuhaus shared his reflections based on his vast experience of Commonwealth affairs as an Australian diplomat, including as High Commissioner to Nigeria (1997-2001), Director of the Political Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2002-2008) and as Ambassador to Zimbabwe (2011-2015), with accreditation to Zambia, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo.

Matthew Neuhaus reflected on the evolutions of CMAG since its inception in 1995, and on its interplay with the good offices of the Secretary General. Looking at the influence of successive Secretary Generals, of CMAG chairs and ministers, and at the places where discussions take place and consensus is attempted (from Marlborough House in London to member countries and the corridors of the United Nations in New York every September), Matthew Neuhaus showed the importance of situating current debates in the long history of the modern Commonwealth, from the coups of the 1960s to the tragic death of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his fellow Ogoni dissidents during the 1995 CHOGM, which led to the suspension of Nigeria, and to the very recent partial suspension of Gabon, a year after its admission into the Commonwealth in 2022. After a survey of several key case studies, including the Gambia (out of the Commonwealth 2013-2017), the Maldives (2016-2020) and Zimbabwe (since 2013), and reflecting on Secretary General Shirley Botchwey's proposed Democracy Fragility Index, Matthew Neuhaus called for mechanisms to clarify the respective roles of CMAG and good offices, give greater and structured place to civil society organisations and argued that speedy and transparent observer group reports were vital. Throughout, the Commonwealth's wide-ranging activities, from prevention to sanction, from exceptional to routine, were taken into consideration.

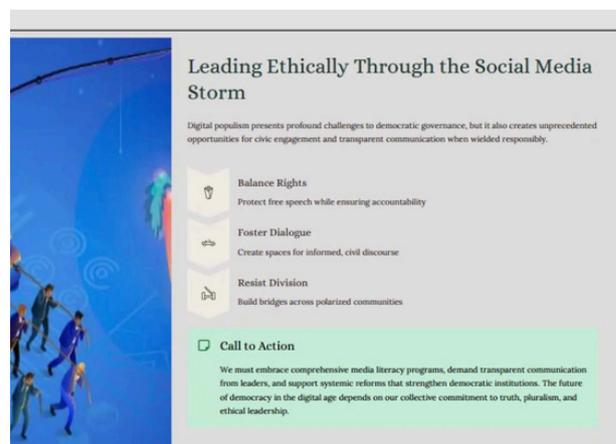
The Q&A reflected on the role of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum in observer groups and, more widely, in supporting democracy and civil society at subnational level. Beyond the important question of human and financial resources, several participants emphasized the need for accredited organisations to have more structured, formalized and transparent channels to feed into CMAG and Secretariat conversations. Failings in the so-called established democracies – the UK, India, Australia and Canada – were also highlighted, and the question of active support for democracy in these countries, including through elections observations, was raised. Cameroon and Tanzania were also discussed, in the context of recent/forthcoming elections and the various forms of intimidation opposition groups faced. Participants also suggested that good offices should be used to address restrictive NGO and media laws, discussed the importance of freedom of expression, in a Commonwealth of both states and peoples, and reflected on the evolution of the Secretariat in recent years.

¹ Matthew Neuhaus's keynote lecture was subsequently published in *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs and Policy Studies* (vol. 114, n°6, December 2025; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2591820>)

The third panel, **‘Evolving Democracies in the Commonwealth: Commonwealth Case Studies’**, moved to test definitions and practices of democracy in India and Nigeria, reflecting on the interplay between subnational, national, international and transnational dynamics.

First, Bodhi Ramteke considered the ways in which castes in India are a direct and fundamental challenge to Commonwealth principles of equality, and questioned the organisation’s ‘institutional challenge’ on the matter, reflecting more broadly on epistemic injustices where the voices and knowledge of certain groups and individuals are systematically marginalised. What does it mean for the states, governments, peoples and historians of the contemporary Commonwealth that systemic social inequality is central to one of the largest, influential members of the association? What does caste as a ‘human rights crisis’ mean for Indian ‘democracy’ and for Commonwealth values? Reflecting on the hopes of Ambedkar at Indian independence, Bodhi Ramteke argued for more critical, nuanced approaches of rights and liberty, taking full account of social and economic structures and values and seeking full emancipation. Given transnational connections, the UK, Canada and Australia were also brought into the discussion, and questions raised about the ways in which caste based discrimination affects rights in both the public and the private spheres. Just as more attention had been given recently to LGBTIQ+ rights (still breached in many Commonwealth countries, Heads of Government, the Secretariat and accredited organisations like the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative should address caste based violence and exclusion.

The impact of constitutions was also central to Aliyu Ibrahim’s argument in favour of independent candidacy in Nigerian elections. At present, all candidates must secure the sponsorship of a political party in order to stand for political office. This practice has led to voter apathy in much of the country, while the number of Nigerians favouring democracy over other forms of government has fallen in recent years, according to several surveys. At present, courts are often reluctant to intervene in parties’ internal affairs and are therefore seen as complicit in the dominance of certain individuals and groups. Drawing comparisons with recent UK and South African evolutions, Aliyu Ibrahim made a strong case for the admission of independent candidates in the electoral process, as a means of both generating voter interest and ensuring a more transparent nomination process. A revision of the Nigerian Electoral Act is vital, and approved by the National Assembly; it was thus hoped that the executive would come to accept it too. Olakunle Michael Folami next argued that in Nigeria, voting patterns, as well as the distribution of economic resources and power, was influenced by ethnic identities. From a nationwide survey of traditional figures, office holders and the media, including women and young people, it was concluded that a sense of ethnic belonging – in connection with religion, gender, age, and other identity markers – remained strong for many, and influenced understandings of power sharing, legitimacy and accountability.



In the Q&A, participants wondered if state sovereignty was the main bloc to Commonwealth action on rights, compounded by the size and influence of countries like India. Some participants were concerned by India's recent lack of engagement at CHOGMs, and apparent little regard for civil society organisations. Debates also focused on the place of religion, on the persistence of patriarchy and of gender stereotyping in the political cultures of all Commonwealth member states (to varying degrees), as well as on the formal and informal constraints placed on candidates – the unspoken rules of election competition – and on the interplay between definitions of the nation and definitions of democracy. There was a marked interest in structures, constitutions, and selection processes in making political norms and cultures – and in providing, therefore, avenues for advancement. While discussing who speaks for the nation, participants considered concrete means to achieve more inclusivity. They also debated the responsibility of the Commonwealth as a network, and of the Commonwealth Secretariat specifically, in addressing these questions, in connection with non-governmental organisations working for full equality.

The final panel turned to **'The Commonwealth, Democracy and New Technologies'**. What exactly is the impact of digital technologies and artificial intelligence on democracy? How does the digital sphere reshape power relations between citizens, states, and multinational technology companies? And what can the Commonwealth do in this changing context? When discussing digital technologies and democracy, two familiar narratives tend to dominate: that digital tools empower citizens by expanding access to information and connecting them to global networks; and that these technologies undermine state sovereignty, as transnational digital networks can bypass governmental restrictions, raising concerns about a new form of digital colonialism in which powerful algorithms and global platforms exert influence over national political processes. Traditionally, the state is cast as the victim, having its sovereignty challenged by borderless flows of information. Ashonshok Kachui challenged this assumption, arguing that states and the multinational companies controlling digital platforms may, in fact, share converging interests. Rather than being passive victims of digital colonialism, states can become active participants in shaping, restricting, or instrumentalising the democratic potential of these technologies. Governments, acting as gatekeepers to a large market of citizens (who are also data-consumers), can negotiate with digital companies to control access to their populations. The resulting form of "digital colonialism" is therefore not imposed on states, but jointly exercised by states and corporations on citizens.

This observation is particularly relevant for large states such as India, whose market size gives them leverage with multinational companies. They may not need to resort to visible censorship or internet shutdowns, but they can subtly shape the digital eco-system through negotiated arrangements with transnational digital corporations, exchanging access to citizens' data in return for compliance with state-defined rules. Promoting democracy by merely encouraging governments to allow open access to the internet or digital platforms may be counterproductive when dealing with some states.

The content circulating online can amplify governmental propaganda, spread disinformation, and ultimately reinforce illiberal practices rather than challenge them. This is not new; but what Ashonshok Kachui highlighted is the existence of a form of structural complicity between governments and digital corporations, and the way their aligned interests can undermine democratic norms.

Sumit Kumar Pathak next argued that cyberspace is not a civic space. It operates according to rules and incentives defined not by governments or domestic institutions but by external transnational private actors (i.e. multinational digital companies). In this environment, democracy risks being reduced to "algorithmically orchestrated consent".

A genuine civic space within cyberspace has yet to be built. Moreover, access to digital technologies introduces new forms of inequality. The divide is no longer only about voting rights or political participation, but about who has access to digital tools, who can shape online discourse, and who benefits from visibility. Cyberspace tends to foster the emergence of a new, self-appointed elite (such as individual influencers or individuals who proclaim themselves the legitimate defenders of public-interest causes) whose interests may diverge from the general public good. These actors can serve as intermediaries for external forces, or the governments themselves, to disseminate targeted narratives or propaganda.

AI and digital technologies make it easier to persuade and manipulate, rather than convince citizens. Meera Matthew addressed the rise of digital populism transforming the relationship between political leaders and citizens. With the rise of digital platforms, leaders can bypass the press, civil society, and political parties to communicate directly with segmented audiences. This phenomenon is powered by the speed and automation of online content production, amplified by AI, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. As a result, digital populism is reshaping the democratic landscape by weakening the traditional gatekeepers of public debate. Meera Matthew argued that only coordinated efforts at international level can ensure transparency in platform governance, limit the spread of manipulative content, and strengthen democratic resilience in an environment where information flows do not respect national boundaries. The Q&A reflected on the lessons to be drawn for the Commonwealth, particularly with regard to strengthening the press, empowering civil society and ensuring citizens' free access to information. With the rise of powerful, largely unregulated digital companies, combined with the proliferation of AI-generated content that blurs the line between truth and falsehood, such initiatives are not only insufficient to ensure democratic values are upheld, but might even prove counterproductive. Digital technologies can empower citizens, or empower illiberal governments, political entrepreneurs or private bodies whose specific interests do not necessarily align with democratic values or the common good. But Commonwealth programmes could assist in digital, critical literacy, taking into account the size, resources, and political structures of its member states.

This could include a collective reflection where states share experiences and good practices in digital governance. The question of how algorithms are designed and how digital platforms are managed is a global concern for developing, emerging, and developed countries alike. Although these states differ in their capacity to negotiate with powerful digital platforms, this very imbalance could make digital governance a new focus for Commonwealth cooperation. By working together, member states could strengthen their collective leverage in negotiations while also establishing common norms to ensure that such interactions promote good practices rather than enabling illiberal ones. Some participants suggested quiet diplomacy and consensus based approaches to encourage member states to adopt transparent, accountable practices in their interactions with digital platforms, without encroaching on national sovereignty or triggering the defensive reactions that more coercive approaches might provoke. Others argued that, as political communication becomes increasingly personalised, unmediated, and algorithmically shaped, the Commonwealth can also support the development of a genuine civic space within cyberspace, where citizens engage not only as consumers of content but as active and informed participants in democratic debates.

By working on new democratic norms for digital leadership or digital literacy programmes, the Commonwealth could upgrade already existing resources to tackle this new challenge.

Finally, the network of informal associations and programmes (the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Commonwealth Journalists Association, the Commonwealth Cyber Initiative, etc.) that operate at sub-state level through peer-training and -learning, is an undeniable asset for building states' democratic resilience in the digital age.

Many states lack the expertise or resources to regulate AI-driven information eco-systems, to support independent journalism, or to develop digital literacy programmes. Because these informal Commonwealth associations are themselves transnational, some participants suggested that they could have valuable resources to address some of the challenges to democratic practices raised by the digital revolution.

In a final roundtable, participants to the conference discussed current trends and future research. Several questions were addressed in turn:

- how can the Commonwealth remain credible and relevant in promoting democracy and human rights?
- how can its contribution be strengthened in the current context of declining multilateralism?
- How can, or should, the Commonwealth deal with sovereignty in the current international context?
- Thirty years on, has the Commonwealth learned from the crisis of the 1990s/2000s? How can it mobilise this experience and its own history to meet the challenges of authoritarianism and popular nationalism?

Participants took stock of the fact that the Commonwealth Secretariat of the 2020s is very different from what it was in the 1970s-1990s, not just because of local, regional, national, international and global evolutions since then, but also in terms of human and financial resources. They also discussed the importance of further research in the connections, relations, ongoing and possible dialogues between the Commonwealth and other organisations (including in the Francophone and Lusophone spheres). Participants reflected on the impact of 'cultures of impunity' and of the criminalisation of protest, both outside and within Commonwealth member states, on 'cultures of democracy' and state and non-state agency.

Overall, it was felt that Commonwealth institutions and associations still provided added value to achieving democracy, equality, human rights and the rule of law, notably in relation to young people, and discussions revolved on the many voices behind the "cultures" of democracy, with the need to bring in a wide range of divides (urban/rural, for instance), more fully into the picture. How is consensus achieved? Is there still a place for quiet diplomacy? Has the Commonwealth as a voluntary association impacted global democracy, and what influence have the political cultures of member states had on the making of pan-Commonwealth programmes? Promoting democracy in its fullest sense, ultimately, comes up against the boundaries of states. For the Commonwealth Secretariat, striking a balance between defining and applying common values and protecting the sovereignty of states is vital, practically and symbolically. In this respect, the politics of emotions (including anger, pride and shame), of language (from plain speaking to terminology and mono/plurilingualism) and of access (across all media) are certainly key areas of further study.

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