
Collaborating with the Commonwealth Secretariat

It is several years since the UPR started. Sometimes it does not seem that long ago and sometimes it does.

Those of us, such as the United Kingdom, who went through the review in the first round in April 2008 are now reviewing our progress. It is at this juncture that the time elapsed seems short. In 2008 we said we would do x, y and z, and we accepted a range of recommendations from states. Have we made enough progress? When our next review comes around in 2012, will we have achieved all that we said we would do?

Commonwealth countries that have been preparing for UPR together are well placed to assess the results of the process as a whole – that is when the time passed seems longer to me. The friendships and exchanges we have built up through working together are well established, and we feel as though our colleagues are old friends. Preparing for the UPR together has brought the Commonwealth family closer.

Let us remind ourselves what the UPR was all about. It was a new mechanism, designed because many countries thought the UN human rights bodies focused on just a few states, and rarely or never on the rest. We wanted it to be a thorough, effective review, based on our mutual interest in how every UN member state is doing in fulfilling the human rights obligations that we share, and mutual support in helping countries to make progress.

Your countries all have the right – even, I would say, the responsibility – to hold my country to account for how we abide by our human rights obligations, and the UPR has provided that opportunity. We all have different challenges, and being open about that, being ready to accept criticism and to listen to suggestions and explain our policies and plans is not easy for any government. But equally, we are all going through this together; we are all supporting each other to make progress. And that is what these Commonwealth seminars have been all about.

What matters is not just the review itself in Geneva but also – much more – what each country does to make progress and to implement recommendations as a result of the review.

More than half-way through the first UPR cycle, we have the opportunity to consider both the Geneva process and what we are doing at home to implement the recom-

mendations. It is also important to take stock of the achievements we have seen in many countries, and to consider the challenges that lie ahead.

First, the UPR process, as a new mechanism, has got off to a good start. It is widely seen as a success. That is partly thanks to this sort of work between us. Second, and more importantly, the proof of whether UPR is a real success is ultimately about what we do at home in each of our countries. Already I am aware of considerable progress in some countries as a result of the UPR, and many countries can be proud of some achievements. This seminar gives us an opportunity to share our experiences and to discuss how we can work together to support progress.

So maybe the focus of the Commonwealth's UPR work is shifting now towards implementation and follow-up. Of course we should not forget countries that have yet to experience their first review and that would like help and support.

As one of the states reviewed in the very first week of UPR, I hope the UK has been able to help other countries going through the review after us. We have also learned a great deal from other countries that did it differently or better.

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