The Commonwealth Teachers’ Group – vision and mission

Steve Sinnott

It is easy to become cynical about our ability to change systems, about working for peace and justice, about human rights flouted in so many places throughout the world. Yet our young people need not be tainted with that cynicism. They have the energy, the idealism, the courage to take risks which working for human rights often demands. We have seen in South Africa how young people played a crucial role in processes leading to change in our land. Without our young people it might never have happened. Many of our young people did what they did because of their teachers.

The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu, in a message to a Commonwealth Teachers’ Conference on Human Rights, 1996

Teachers are an enormous force for good in the world. In many countries teachers and their organisations devote great energy and creativity to provide an education for young people often in the most desperate of circumstances. An organisation bringing together teachers from across the Commonwealth can be a real force for good.

This paper seeks to set out the mission of the Commonwealth Teachers’ Group (CTG) – a group that operates under the auspices of Education International (EI) the world-wide teachers’ body representing over 30 million teachers in more than 100 countries. The paper further outlines the history of the origins of the CTG and some of its activities to date.

Too often in international gatherings addressing education policy the voice of teachers has been missing. At the 16th CCEM in Cape Town this is, however, set to change. The CTG is honoured to organise the first ever Teachers’ Forum which is to coincide with the Conference of Education Ministers from throughout the Commonwealth. This is a real opportunity for teachers in the Commonwealth to showcase their commitment to playing a central role at the Conference and to be seen as central partners in the achievement of Education for All goals in the Commonwealth – all children to be in school by 2015.

A brief history

A small group of organisations meeting informally at the EI World Congress in Jomtien 2001 agreed that a paper be drafted which sought to address the issue of establishing a Commonwealth teachers’ grouping for unions affiliated to Education International.

These organisations were the Australian Education Union (AEU), the All India Federation of Teachers’ Organisations (AIFTO), the Caribbean Association of Teachers (CAT), the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF), the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union (SADTU).

In order to give context to the establishment of the CTG, it is necessary to briefly consider the nature of the modern Commonwealth and to recall some of the activities that have been undertaken in recent years by a number of Commonwealth EI affiliates.

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is an organisation of over 50 countries that are expected to observe key principles and values. These are set out in various documents including the 1971 Declaration of Commonwealth Principles agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government in Singapore. This states that members are opposed, ‘to all forms of colonial domination and racial oppression and are committed to the principles of human dignity and equality’. It also states that, ‘the wide disparities in wealth between different sections of mankind are too great to be tolerated, they...create world tensions; our aim is their progressive removal. We will therefore seek to use our efforts to overcome poverty, ignorance, and disease in raising standards of life and achieving a more equitable society.’

The 1991 Harare Declaration developed the work started 20 years earlier and identified two purposes for the Commonwealth: firstly, ‘the strengthening of human rights’; and, secondly, ‘the social and economic development of all members’. Democracy and human rights are now seen as the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth. The Harare Declaration went on to commit Commonwealth members to ‘equality for women, so that they may exercise their full and equal rights and the provision of universal access to education for the population of our countries’.

The Commonwealth has expanded in recent years and has taken into membership some countries not previously having an historic link with the UK. Such countries include Portuguese-speaking Mozambique. In addition the Commonwealth Secretariat has received an application for membership from the Palestinian Authority. Since the Palestinian Authority is not yet a state no decision has been made by the Commonwealth in relation to the application.
Recent teachers’ organisations activities on Commonwealth issues

The CTF has extensive contacts with teachers’ organisations from across the Commonwealth. It has enormous credibility as friend to teachers in developing countries. For many years the CTF has worked with the Sierra Leone Teachers’ Union (SLTU), for example, and has been engaged in other projects with EI teachers’ organisations in a number of Commonwealth countries including, Dominica, Ghana, Guyana, India, Malawi, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. It is also the case that other organisations have deep and friendly relations with EI affiliated organisations from the Commonwealth.

Over the years at Commonwealth Education Ministers’ meetings, some EI affiliated teacher organisations have co-operated on a number of activities to promote education and human rights and to take forward some key EI policies. At the XIII Education Ministers’ Meeting in Botswana in 1997, for example, a number of organisations promoted education and human rights. A statement entitled the Stoke Rochford Declaration was presented to Education Ministers. The work was co-ordinated by AIFTO, NUT and SADTU. The statement was the result of work undertaken by some 26 EI organisations from 24 countries that attended a conference at the National Union of Teachers’ Conference Centre in 1996. The then Secretary General of the Commonwealth Chief Anyoku addressed the Conference. EI General Secretary, Fred van Leeuwen, also addressed the Conference. Richard Bourne of the Institute of Education, University of London, provided assistance with many aspects of the Conference.

At the 1997 Education Ministers’ Meeting, in addition to presenting the declaration to the Education Ministers, a workshop on education and human rights was organised and there was an exhibition stand displaying and promoting the Declaration.

Following the development of the Stoke Rochford Declaration, a number of EI organisations were invited by the Commonwealth Secretariat to take part in its major activity to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Organisations from the Caribbean and from Africa took part including the NUT, the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT), and Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), and the Dominica Association of Teachers (DAT). Various ideas to take forward initiatives in relation to human rights in schools were developed including a Commonwealth Secretariat sponsored Record of Achievement.

In 2000 Tom Bediako, EI Regional Co-ordinator for Africa, and I (then Deputy General Secretary, National Union of Teachers, UK), were members of the international advisory group for the parallel symposium of the XIV Commonwealth Education Ministers’ Meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. This enabled teachers’ organisations to be well placed to push key EI campaigning objectives. The Global Campaign for Education and the Education For All (EFA) objectives were heavily promoted. The CTF, NUT GNAT and SADTU campaigned hard to ensure that in the final declaration of the Education Ministers the objective of all children in the world receiving primary education by 2015 was included. Despite the fine words concerning education contained in such documents as The Statement of Principles of the Commonwealth most of the children not in school across the world live in Commonwealth countries. Of the 100 million children not in school at least 60 million are in Commonwealth countries.

The activities that took place in Nova Scotia in November 2000 ensured that the Ministers’ statement at the end of the Conference made it clear that the Commonwealth was committed to supporting governments in meeting the 2015 objective. Without such campaigning there would have been no reference to the EFA 2015 objective and no commitment to securing this human right for the children of the Commonwealth.

Following the Education Ministers’ meeting in November 2000 the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, and the then International Development Secretary, Clare Short, announced the setting up of a fund to take forward within the Commonwealth the EFA 2015 objective. The fund was launched in 2002.

At recent Education Ministers’ meetings they have discussed matters of direct concern to teachers and their trade unions. Ministers have often lamented the low status of teachers. Yet many of the same ministers rarely consult with teachers’ unions on professional or educational issues. Often teacher’s organisations in the Commonwealth are denied the right to negotiate salaries and conditions of service. Frequently teachers are denied rights enjoyed by other citizens such as the right to join a political party. Education Ministers, without appreciating the irony, expect teachers to introduce citizenship education into schools.

The ministers have not been allowed to get away with these comments unchallenged when we have been present but we have not always been in some important forums. However, the activities of the CTG in recent years have begun to change that landscape.

The CTG now acts as a single organisation for teachers with the important prefix ‘Commonwealth’ which can now be consulted by the Commonwealth Secretariat in relation to Commonwealth education programmes or ministers’ meetings. Such an organisation is now able to make the teachers’ case regularly and with vigour. There is now an organisation recognising the need to argue for education and the rights of children. There is now an organisation using the strength of Education International and its policies to address the professional and trade union concerns of teachers across the Commonwealth.

Functions of the CTG

The CTG, operating under the auspices of EI, has a number of important functions. EI has within its membership established organisations and contacts in all Commonwealth countries. This is an enormous asset. The unions share common values expressed in the constitution of Education International. In addition such organisations have a perspective that understands the interplay between the concern for teacher’s rights and interests, wider professional concerns and the educational interests of children and young people.

The CTG attempts to promote the values that unite member organisations of EI, and to take forward EI policies and give greater support to each other. In addition, it makes it possible to work with other bodies to promote greater contact between
Commonwealth teachers, and develop links that are supportive of professional development activities. The promotion of greater contact between Commonwealth students could also be a feature of the CTG in the future. The CTG also aims to promote the interests of teachers and education with the Commonwealth Secretariat and other Commonwealth bodies.

The CTG is responsible for liaison with education related institutions within the Commonwealth. It has established partnerships with other organisations such as the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT) and has access to resources for professional development activities for teachers across the Commonwealth.

**Recent activities of the CTG**

Perhaps the most significant achievement to date for the CTG has been the establishment of the Commonwealth Protocol on Teacher Recruitment. It is fair to say that without the CTG it would never have happened.

In recent years it has been the case that to deal with the problem of teacher shortages in developed countries, such as in the UK, teacher recruitment agencies acting for schools, national and local government scoured the world looking for teachers to fill vacancies in many schools. Little regard was paid to the needs of the education systems in developing countries and damage to the education systems of many Commonwealth countries was the result. Many teachers paid a heavy price too for their rights were trampled upon and example of teachers being told lies by recruitment agencies can be cited. Teachers from developing countries were often placed in the most difficult schools after little if any preparation, training or orientation. In the UK many of these migrant teachers were made redundant and according to a teachers’ charity a number were made destitute. The lives and careers of some teachers from developing countries were disregarded.

Concern was expressed by both teachers and the education ministers from the small states of the Caribbean. Ministers at the 15th CCEM called for a protocol to be drafted to address the concerns of the small states and teachers. Ministers were hosted at the NUT’s conference centre at Stoke Rochford in Lincolnshire in the UK. The protocol is having a real impact in the Commonwealth and beyond. The National Union of Teachers reports fewer migrants experiencing difficulties and it is likely that provisions in the Protocol dealing with the targeting of vulnerable education systems seems to be having an effect. Kenya and Rwanda, a non-Commonwealth country, used the protocol to manage the recruitment of English teachers by Rwanda. UNESCO and the International Labour Organization (ILO) are supportive of the protocol.

In adopting the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol ministers agreed that ‘teachers across the Commonwealth can have greater access to teaching in other Commonwealth Countries as a significant continuing professional development activity’ and ‘a structured and well-managed programme of teacher exchanges and of trade in skills…can benefit individual teachers in their professional development, as well as strengthen and enrich education systems.’

As a result of these clauses in the Protocol, Commonwealth Education Ministers requested that a Working Group should be established to explore opportunities for professional development of teachers across the Commonwealth. At the request of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the CTG has also undertaken the convening of the Working Group.

**Conclusion**

In 2005, the EI Executive Board formally agreed the establishment of the Commonwealth Teachers’ Group, which will be formally launched at The Teachers’ Forum at 16th CCEM, where its constitution will be adopted.

The Commonwealth Teachers’ Group is set to go from strength to strength and aims to be a strong voice on behalf of the teachers and children, for human rights and democracy throughout the Commonwealth.

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**Biographical notes**

Steve Sinnott was elected as General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers (UK) in June 2004. As Deputy General Secretary, Steve had responsibility for the Union’s international work, speaking widely on education and human rights. He has received a number of international awards. Steve is Convenor of the Commonwealth Teachers’ Group, an ambassador for Education Action International, a trustee of the No More Landmines Trust and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.