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Speech Transcript: Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon

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Democracy and Governance: The Commonwealth Experience **Harvard, the US, and Democracy – ‘Vision, Possibility, Evolution’**

Good afternoon – I am honoured and delighted to be here at Harvard.

On Friday last week I drove past London’s Southwark Cathedral, where John Harvard was baptized 400 years ago. Now, I stand here to witness the result of his vision: one of the world’s greatest seats of learning.

The first buildings erected in 1638, and the 400 or so volumes of Harvard’s library that filled those first shelves, have now become a cathedral of learning, at the top of the Ivy League and at the top of the global league. The Harvard story of vision, possibility and evolution, is one that we can readily apply to our topics today: ‘Democracy’ and ‘Governance’. So let me use those three words today as my theme: vision, possibility and evolution.

I am particularly delighted to be here right now during a Presidential election race, because – as someone who has followed American politics since the 1950s – it is always exciting to watch the primaries unfold.

Americans are asking how they want democratic values to unfold at home – and we know that this will have an impact on how democratic values unfold outside the US, too. The world is watching.

Whatever happens, I know that the deep-set democratic culture here will prevail. Say what you like about the close-run contest that culminated so dramatically in Florida with those hanging chads, but the fact is that power changed hands peacefully, ‘life went on’ as they say, and American democracy showed its true colours.

Global democracy at a glance

Before I talk about the Commonwealth, let me quickly look at the rising and falling stock of this commodity, at least 2500 years old, that is Democracy. When Plato and Aristotle wrote of the rule of the ‘demos’, the ‘people’, they didn’t include women and slaves. It just goes to show that democracy has continued to evolve from its early roots.

Democracy matters and democracy is difficult. I say so as a politician of 30 years, and a passionate democrat.

In the last few months, we have seen the trauma of a flawed Kenyan election in one Commonwealth corner of the world, and the promise of a Pakistani election after years of drama and Benazir Bhutto's tragic assassination in another corner. Last year, we saw thousands of students and monks on the streets of Rangoon calling for Democracy. What is clear is that people are prepared to put their lives on the line for democracy.

Its march over the last generation especially has been impressive – in Western Europe in Greece, Spain and Portugal, and spectacularly in eastern Europe, as a continent was reunited. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of authoritarian regimes in Asia and Latin America: all are landmarks. The growth of multiparty democracy in Africa is another progressive landmark, with a crowning moment in 1994 when South Africa voted in its entirety for the first time.

Freedom House claim that, in the early 1970s, less than a quarter of the world's countries were democratic. Now, the figure is two-thirds. I think we can all buy that as a vital statistic.

But has what George Bush Senior called a 'new world order' of compassionate capitalism won the day? Is Democracy established? Our deeply-held Commonwealth belief that Democracy and Development go hand in hand, is not always so straightforward in practice. There will be always be rich and undemocratic countries – or poor and democratic ones – which will buck that trend.

Meanwhile the Cold War has given way to the struggle with international terrorism. The number of new democracies is stalling.

We cannot be permanently fuelled by the honeymoon moments. Reality is biting in the new democracies: many of the hopes surrounding those many privatizations of the early 1990s were built on sand, and not on the rock of democratic institutions and strong legal frameworks. And they now face the painful reality of building the democratic institutions and culture that make a vote a thing worth having.

In some of the newest and most watched of democracies, like Iraq and Afghanistan, democracy has come to be seen as something of a dirty word, and as something imposed. There are quips that 'mid-West' views of democracy can't be imposed on the Middle East. But the notion of so-called 'Western Democracy', is just as Teutonic as it's Texan, as New Zealand as it's Nebraskan.

And those quips can make us smile. I saw a car bumper sticker the other day: 'Be nice to America, or you get democracy'.

Meanwhile in the oldest and most established democracies, there is cynicism: people are less likely to vote, and more likely to denounce their politicians who are neither especially corrupt nor inefficient. 60% of British citizens voted in the 2005 elections – down from 80% a generation ago. The same figure of 60% voted here in the US in 2004, and that was the *highest* turnout since 1968.

So when I say that democracy is 'evolving', I am also realistic. As I said, democracy matters, and democracy is difficult.

What is the Commonwealth?

So that is my quick sketch of the volatile stock of Democracy. Let me now say a little of how we see things in the Commonwealth, and how we advance things.

But let me first tell you what the Commonwealth is, because I have encountered as much misunderstanding of it here in the US, as I have elsewhere.

Several years ago, an envoy from a country hosting an important Commonwealth meeting was sitting with the Prime Minister of another member nation. The Prime Minister, who was not very well briefed, asked: "Are the Americans and Japanese coming to your meeting?" Without batting an eyelid, the experienced and suave envoy replied: "Your Excellency, the Americans left the Commonwealth over 200 years ago – and it was an American General who made sure the Japanese never joined...!"

So I must debunk one myth: the Commonwealth is *not* 'the British Commonwealth', which died in 1949 when new republics like India joined Britain in the organisation on an equal footing. The Modern Commonwealth has transcended its historical ties with the new ties of shared values, institutions, customs and networks, and the bonds of jointly-met challenges and jointly-held aspirations.

It is 53 nations and 1.8 billion people, from the giant that is India to tiny Tuvalu in the Pacific with a population of 11,000. Half our members are officially 'small states', with less than 1½ million people each. The Commonwealth makes up one third of the world's population, one quarter of its countries, and accounts for a fifth of its trade. It spans continents and oceans: the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, Asian, the Pacific. It is home to rich and poor, and people of every colour and creed. Its ethos and agenda is dominated by the concerns of the developing world, which make up the majority of its membership.

Former colonies, dominions, protectorates, trusteeships: we've got them all. Those nations are now joined as equals, and they share the fundamental beliefs of democracy and freedom, and a right to development. Our Commonwealth priorities are set every two years, when Heads of Government meet, as they did in Kampala last November.

Their overarching aims are two-fold – supporting democracy, and supporting development. We stress the deep-seated, organic links between the two. With a modest budget of not much more than \$80 million a year, we are still able to have a huge impact, through a combination of our expertise, our common experience and the will to share it, and our low-key, trusted, easy access.

I could list some of the good Commonwealth things – things which you might not know about us, like our model legislation on money-laundering, extraditions and deportations; our prescription for the recovery of illegal assets; our trade advisers supporting WTO negotiations; our Protocols to manage the migration of teachers and nurses; our powerful network of young 'Ambassadors for Positive Living', so vital for changing opinions and supporting young people with AIDS.

But let me limit myself to the claim that the Commonwealth's authority comes in several forms. It's the power, and the moral authority, of 'family' and of those who associate themselves voluntarily.

It's the power of the combined voice. When 53 countries speak as one – as they did on trade in 2005, for instance, or on climate change in 2007 – then it has impact. That trade statement led directly to progress at the WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong, and the climate change statement fed straight into the UN environment summit in Bali. We reach our decisions by consensus: it's never easy, but it's always worth it. I believe that we constitute the very best of multilateralism.

If 53 countries, with such diversity, turn up at a larger multilateral gathering, all singing from the same song-sheet already, their influence on the outcomes can be immediate and tangible.

It's the power of people who speak the 'same language'. Not just English: I mean the shared language of institutions, parliaments, legal, and education systems. It's the language of shared values.

It's the power of giving voice to those who are not often heard. That means our small states. But it also means those who need us most, which is why we place such emphasis on our support for women, girls, and young people in general, for the unschooled, the diseased, the marginalised.

Commonwealth democracy – in principle

So today we examine the Commonwealth experience of this democracy and governance. I'd like to look at the principle, and the practice. Those two are not too far apart: the Commonwealth does match words with deeds.

What we mean by democracy, democratic institutions and democratic practices has been clearly spelt out. We have Commonwealth Declarations of 1971 and 1991 that set out our fundamental political values. Our so-called Latimer House Principles of 2003 define the roles of the three branches of Government. Our Aberdeen Principles establish the importance of local democracy and how to achieve it.

I have spoken many times about those three pillars: the legislature, the executive and the judiciary...about the *official* tasks of the national legislature in making laws and making money available, and the *unofficial* task, not to be marginalized or muzzled, either by the executive or by the judiciary. America's Founding Fathers set down this separation of powers so clearly in the Constitution.

I have spoken, too, about defining the term limits of office, about the importance of political parties and the constructive role *all* should play, whether in Government or Opposition. Political parties should not disappear after an election, and then come back for the next one.

But the institutions must be buttressed by democratic *culture*.

Our concern is not simply that there are ticks in the boxes next to the words elections, parliament, executive, army and police force answerable to parliament; independent judiciary; public accounts system and auditor general; human rights commission; ombudsman, and so on.

There *should* be ticks in those boxes - but they mean little if they are just the forms, and not the substance, of democracy. Democracy has its own ideas, principles and values. And these will see democracies through when institutions fail. A deep democratic culture will mean much more – in societies that are properly inclusive of women, for instance, and which have a lively civil society and an independent and responsible media.

Furthermore, one has to move forward on all those institutions. It isn't possible to move on some and not others. If you train up a good Police Force, it will be less effective if the Judiciary is weak or corrupt. Free and fair elections won't be enough if the Parliament that ensues is dysfunctional. All those institutions need to be progressed together.

In the post-colonial period of last century, many countries were given democratic systems which did not fit the local landscape. This gave democracy and so-called Westminster politics a bad name. What we know now is that a country will only absorb democratic ideals if existing traditions, local cultures and practices are part of the new model. If a democratic model marginalises existing chiefly structures – or a single tribe, ethnic, linguistic or religious group – it will not survive.

A few weeks ago, Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed said publicly that Bangladesh should have its own brand of democracy, as the 'Westminster model' didn't fit.

I agree. Bangladeshi democracy is not diminished by not fitting the Westminster model. Beneath models lie important maxims. You know them as well as I: 'all men are created equal' wrote Jefferson; 'they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights – among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness'. Early American presidents had a way of expressing what we mean. We all still revert to Lincoln, that democracy is of, by for and for the people.

Beyond that, it can take different forms all over the world. Everywhere you look, it's a journey, not a destination. Precisely nowhere gets it perfectly right. Bangladesh cannot abuse its citizens' rights in not calling an election, but it is entitled to work out its own path. When last in Dhaka almost a year ago, I stressed that the people's patience would be sorely tested by an indefinite period under caretaker government, and as at today we still keenly await the announcement of a date for elections this year.

I recall the title of Robert Ruark's 1954 novel about the Mau Mau and Kenya, entitled 'Something of Value'. With the title, he was quoting an old Basuto proverb that if you take something from people - like their own leadership structures - then you have to replace it with something of value. Not many get it right. The fact that Lesotho, for instance, includes its traditional Chiefs in its Upper House. Or that in Samoa's democracy, the Legislative Assembly is built on traditional village-based electoral districts and the role of those with the title of 'Matai', or Chief. It shows the way of melding the old with the new.

The challenge is to build a system having looked at all the alternatives. Parliament, Congress, or National Assembly? Do you have one or two Chambers or Houses? And what systems of voting - first-past-the-post, proportional voting, preferential voting, single transferable voting, votes for specific interest groups? These are *still* the democratic issues being debated in the old world: in Europe, Africa, and Asia. You could say that

the new world of the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Caribbean and Latin America was lucky enough to start with a clean sheet of paper.

But democracy also means less unless it promotes development. Why? Because everyone wants a job, an education, water, sanitation – and most probably more than what they have right now. To be successfully innovative about democracy – and I know that lies at the heart of the Ash Institute – it needs to factor in development too.

That's also why, conversely, economic development is best when it's democratic. Hence the need to promote *all* business activity – as much for small businesses and women and youth entrepreneurs, as for big business. Hence, too, the need for responsible business – accountable socially and environmentally, for instance, as well as financially.

Social transformation is best when it's democratic and inclusive. In the wake of 9/11 and atrocities all around the world and the Commonwealth, our Heads of Government asked us to look at fractured societies and how to rebind and rebuild them.

Harvard can take some of the credit for the results, because it was your (and our) very own Lamont University Professor Amartya Sen, who chaired the group of great Commonwealth thinkers which came up with the publication *Civil Paths to Peace*, which I commend to you. It asks us to see ourselves as the product of multiple identities – not just narrowly defined, often religious or ethnic ones – and to use multiple ways of respecting and understanding each other, not least the avenues provided by education and by the media.

These, then, are some of the principles of Commonwealth democracy. But do we practice what we preach?

Commonwealth Democracy – In Practice

The Commonwealth *practice* of supporting democracy amongst its members is in part punitive, but in essence it's positive. It's also in part high-profile, while in essence it remains low-profile.

In 1995, the Commonwealth gave itself the facility to suspend membership of those who flout its values. We set up a representative group of now 9 Foreign Ministers – the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, or CMAG, as we know it – to monitor serious or persistent violations.

At various stages of the last decade, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe have been suspended from our Commonwealth councils. Zimbabwe eventually decided to take itself out of the Commonwealth in 2003 – a defeat for our and for others' diplomacy, but a clear sign that our founding principles and standards could not be *devalued*, and just as clear a sign that the Commonwealth has teeth.

Fiji and Pakistan are currently suspended from the Commonwealth: neither - I am sorry to say - for the first time. Fiji, in the wake of the military overthrow of government at the end of 2006; and Pakistan, when it did not reverse a series of measures decreed at the time of the State of Emergency of November 2007.

Suspension hurts, but it reflects the collective view and will of all those countries' peers across the membership. It is one of the hardest decisions that can possibly be taken in the world of international affairs, and other organisations look at us with some awe and a good deal of admiration for having such a capacity to self-regulate. They may be reluctant to copy us, but they admire us.

Suspension doesn't signal the end of the relationship. Far from it. We are actively engaged in Fiji right now to provide technical assistance and political support in the run-up to the elections scheduled to take place by March next year. My envoy Sir Paul Reeves is currently in the country, expressly invited by the Fijian authorities. And I expect a Ministerial group will very soon visit Pakistan in the wake of last month's elections.

I'm reminded of how Sierra Leone's new and democratically elected government in 1998 actually asked that it remain on CMAG's agenda – that the spotlight remain focussed on it – even *after* democracy was returned. Sierra Leone saw this as a way of generating support from the rest of the membership to help buttress those values, as the foundations for that fragile country as it moved forwards. That's proof of the constructive power of the way we work.

Beyond the headlines about suspension, we have other sensitive cases on our hands. Take Kenya, where our election observers and others from around the world drew the same conclusions about election deficiencies. Kenya could and should have had a better election than it did.

Former Sierra Leonean President Tejan Kabbah, who headed our Commonwealth election observer group in Kenya, was the very first person to start mediating between President Kibaki and Mr Odinga. I was in close touch with both of them myself, and with Kofi Annan as he inched forward to conclude the power-sharing deal which we warmly welcome. The Commonwealth is committed to Kenya: last week, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UN to work on political and constitutional reform, on the reform of the election commission, and to give support to the media. Those are three contributions we can make.

Safeguarding our values and walking with our members along the path to democracy takes many forms. Sometimes, it happens via the quiet diplomacy of my Special Envoys in places like Guyana, Swaziland, the Maldives, Tonga, and elsewhere. They have defused situations of real political tension.

Sometimes, it is in the help we give to countries in ratifying UN conventions or building national human rights commissions.

Sometimes it takes the form of building democratic institutions like Public Accounts committees, offices of ombudsmen, and civil service commissions. The unsung hero of Sierra Leone's elections of September 2007, for instance, was the independent election commission, which we supported these last few years, especially in its goal that men and women can vote with equal ease, as well as marginalised groups like the disabled.

This is the real stuff of democracy. 'Governance' is the day-to-day, incremental work that allows democratic institutions and culture to thrive. It is not glamorous, but it's vitally

important. It's the quality standard for democracy – 'doing' governance to certain standards is the guarantor of democracy.

It's why I am as proud of the governance work we do in our Commonwealth 'Government and Opposition' seminars, and in stamping out corruption in public spending, as I am of our Commonwealth election observations.

The last time I was in Lesotho, in December 2006, I chaired a 3-hour meeting with 14 of Lesotho's political parties as they prepared to contest last February's snap elections. We had helped to reconfigure their entire Parliamentary and voting system. I found it inspiring to see political opponents sitting around a table and committing one-and-all to nurturing their country's democracy. I also felt honoured that the Commonwealth was chosen to convene that meeting, as a trusted partner and a source of help and advice.

However I describe it and however you look at it, we are an organisation of values, in word and deed.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope the point is made: democracy is about vision, possibility and evolution. Each country has highlights on its journey – and one of them took the form of an alternative tea party, not far from here in Boston Harbour, some 235 years ago. Whatever route it takes, it is only true to itself if it gives people a real say in how they are governed.

This year for the United States, I know America will stay committed to those democratic values, both at home and abroad. I recall the stirring words of Herman Melville, that 'God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our nation; and great things we feel in our souls.' May 2008 be a great year for democracy and a great year for this country. Thank you.

ENDS