

Notes for a Speech on the CSC Alumni

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On the Occasion of the President's Council Dinner

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I have been privileged to be involved with these Commonwealth Study Conferences since 1998, the last Conference over which the late Duke of Edinburgh presided before he passed the torch to our new President, the Princess Royal.

Among these privileges was the opportunity to help write the Conference history. This was another Canadian initiative by the way.

During the drafting, we had a very well-informed co-author for the project. He preferred to stay anonymous but passed along his meticulous edits through his assistant. I remember he was particularly insistent we get the role of the alumni correct.

For the late Duke of Edinburgh, Conference alumni were absolutely vital to the FUTURE of the program not simply its past. He had been insistent from the start that there should be no bureaucracy around these conferences, that their lifespan should not be artificially sustained beyond their usefulness.

It was a very elegant construct he had in mind: If the alumni believe the conferences have value, they will organize the next one. If they did not, it would stop. Simple as that.

And as we know, they almost did stop 15 years ago.

But it turns out this was just a pause.

A few years ago a small group of us from Canada asked to meet you, Your Royal Highness. After sketching out our thoughts, I asked you (nervously I

might add) that IF we organize a renewal of the Commonwealth Study Conferences, would you join us as President.

The immediacy of your response was a jolt of energy for us.

And that was the exact same question posed to your father after the first conference... by the alumni then. If we organize, will you come?

And that first response started the succession of Commonwealth and regional leadership conferences that have enriched the lives and opened the hearts and minds of more than 8,000 emerging leaders in over 40 countries.

Now, the question might seem simple, and the answer easy.

But these are not simple things to organize – I can assure you - as can the the alumni in this room who have been the key leaders in this renewal process.

But it is through the conferences – and expanding the alumni base, decade after decade – that we create this remarkable opportunity for younger leaders. And, through them, create value across the Commonwealth.

Perhaps it was the dreadful COVID period, but we have seen a tendency of late to focus on alumni speaking with alumni – Zooms and reunions and whatnot.

There is something here equivalent to the mule. A biological dead end of sorts.

Because it is only through extending the gift of the conference experience to others – new leaders – as many as possible – globally, regionally – across all sectors - that we do the good we know is possible and we know is much needed in our world.

That is the role the late Duke of Edinburgh envisioned for his creation – led by alumni giving back not to themselves, but to the next generations.

With us today are alumni organizers who are bringing to life the next Commonwealth Study Conference.

I am not going to name everyone here but they include our regional chairs for Canada - who are organizing the all-important study tours, huge undertakings – and our original organizing committee in Canada...

And a wonderful group of UK alumni and key organizers from other part of the world. They all answered the call to help with this renewal because they understand its value and importance - and they would not let the Commonwealth Study Conferences disappear.

Without them in collectivity, there would be nothing to celebrate today.

So I would ask all the alumni here – all of you involved with CSC planning – past and present - to please stand to be recognized for your remarkable contributions.

And in so doing, we also are recognizing well over a hundred others around the world who have been absolutely essential to us being here today.

You will appreciate how this engagement - by all of these wonderful people - is very much in the spirit of those first and all subsequent Conferences.

And we are deeply thankful that when they engage as alumni, your Royal Highness engages with them.

That has been the case for this renewal conference being organized in Canada. And we will ensure the alumni spirit and energy will carry forward from Canada to the next one – perhaps – hopefully – in the global south, where the future of our Commonwealth lies.

Finally, a quick word about the Commonwealth. As a dual citizen of Canada and the UK I have always felt a belonging of sorts within the Commonwealth – the pink nations on our old paper maps.

I have discovered through organizing CSC2023 how this feeling is shared well beyond my narrow personal borders. I understand now there is opportunity for us all here to think and act more globally, as there are shared feelings of kinship – and I call it that carefully, kinship - that go well beyond national borders.

A third of our world's population, with a shared lingua franca, and in most cases a shared understanding of democratic values - or the goal thereof. Without hegemons or national desires to dominate the world. No U.S., no China, no Russia.

Perhaps – hopefully – our Commonwealth conferences will help stimulate new linkages that can help our 56 nations better understand each other and what can only be huge opportunities flowing from shared values.

We will be talking more about this at the opening plenary in Banff in just five weeks, with our 300 delegates from nearly 40 nations, and with you there, your Royal Highness.

The international discussion and debate, the new learning, the questioning of preconceptions - will start once again.

And I trust our Founder will be as pleased as our President.

Thank you

Now I would like to ask Hemi Mitic to come up with an important presentation in the memory of the man whose alumni contributions rank at the very top over the past 50 years.