

OBAMA EFFECT

Seize the Obama moment!

A Report by David Spark, BBC journalist

The Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) urgently needs to promote media freedom and the protection of journalists across the Commonwealth, said Rita Payne, chairman of the UK branch, at a London discussion in March about the reform of international institutions.

“We at the CJA want to send out a clear message that we will do everything we can to highlight abuses of the media in Commonwealth countries and call for the punishment of the perpetrators of violence directed at journalists,” Payne said.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists says that escalating violence in South Asia has been putting journalists at risk. Some in Sri Lanka are targeted by the state while those in Pakistan are caught between opposing forces. Journalists are under fire in African countries, including Kenya and Zimbabwe.

The March discussion, organized by CJA UK and Action for UN Renewal and funded by the British Foreign Office, was headed Time running out – reforming world institutions in the 21st century. Speakers saw the world financial crisis and President Obama’s election as an opportunity for major change. Vijay Mehta of Action for UN Renewal called it the Obama moment. We have an opportunity to do something. Let’s do it.”

Vijay Mehta called for a non-killing, non-violent world society. He wanted political leaders to forgo their national agendas in favour of a global agenda. He wanted new global institutions to reduce poverty and mitigate the effects of climate change. He also suggested that countries in different regions of the world should create common currencies for their regions, as Europe had done.

Lord (David) Owen, former British foreign secretary, argued that the UN Security Council membership should include the world’s largest democracy, India, plus Japan, Germany, Brazil and an African representative to be chosen by Africa itself. He wanted the UN to have peacekeeping forces that could react rapidly. That required transport aircraft and helicopters.

Jesse Griffiths, coordinator of the Bretton Woods Project which seeks to influence the World Bank and IMF, asked: “How can we make the world financial system work for us?”

He called for an international agenda for jobs, justice and climate. Checking global warming required fundamental changes by 2020, only a good ten years away. How would we manage a low-carbon economy? How would we manage exchange rates, create an effective lender of last resort and give every country a say in international decisions?

Dr. Indrajit Coomaraswamy, former economic director at the Commonwealth Secretariat, wanted world bodies to be inclusive. The Group of 20 major countries was an improvement on the G8. But 40 per cent of the world population was outside the G20. Small Commonwealth countries had been encouraged to develop the tax havens. Tougher regulation of these havens imposed high costs on them, while other countries reaped the benefits.

Dr. Coomaraswamy called for a UN economic council independent of the Security Council. He thought the Commonwealth had a role in promoting links between regional groupings of states. "The Commonwealth can help the world to negotiate."

He was concerned for Africa which was suffering through lower prices for its commodities and lower remittances from Africans overseas. Lord Owen said African countries were not going to be listened to after their failures in Darfur and Zimbabwe. "The African Union has not handled Darfur well. The reaction of the Southern African Development Community to Zimbabwe is a disgrace."

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