

# Baroness Warsi on Human Rights in the Commonwealth

By The Rt Hon Baroness Warsi PC

24th March 2014

**Baroness Warsi was scheduled to address guests at the Royal Commonwealth Society's event on 'The Commonwealth and Human Rights' on the 24th of March 2014. Unfortunately she was unable to attend owing to parliamentary business, but was kind enough to allow us to publish the speech that she was going to deliver at the event:**

I am delighted to welcome you all to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I am grateful to the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Kaleidoscope Trust, and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative for bringing this event together and for helping to maintain a focus on human rights in the Commonwealth.

And I thank each of the panel members for sharing their expertise and their time this evening.

We come together with two shared interests:

The Commonwealth;

And the importance of human rights as a core value which underpin the Commonwealth as an organisation.

And as the Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for Human Rights, it is a cause that I am personally committed to.

Next month we will mark the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the London Declaration and the creation of the modern Commonwealth.

The United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka united in 1949 as equal members of the Commonwealth, to co-operate in the pursuit of peace, liberty and progress.

Over time these three fundamental values have been enhanced and strengthened:

Through the Singapore Declaration in 1971:

Committing all members to the principles of human dignity and equality;

Through the Harare declaration in 1991:

Committing all members to equal rights and opportunities for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief;

And most recently the Commonwealth Charter in 2012 – signed by all members in London.

The Charter encompasses the 16 core values and principles of the Commonwealth, including:

Human Rights;

Democracy;

Tolerance, Respect and Understanding;

Freedom of Expression;

And equality and respect for all people on any grounds.

We should not underestimate the achievement in agreeing the Commonwealth Charter.

It is never easy getting consensus within an international organisation. I should know as Minister with responsibility for the UN. Commonwealth members should be commended for what they have achieved.

However, perhaps the greater challenge is putting words into action.

So, collectively, the Commonwealth needs to take concrete steps towards implementing the commitments and aspirations all members have agreed.

Some have, perhaps rightly at times, questioned the credibility of the Commonwealth as an international organisation founded on its values – and given that its members are at different stages of implementing the Charter.

I recognise these concerns.

But we also have to be realistic about the extent of the challenges we face and the time it will take to implement and achieve real, sustained and necessary change.

We must remember the Commonwealth is a family of 53 equal members. With equal voices. And although we are united by shared history, shared goals and shared aspirations, like most families, we do not always agree.

But the best way to address an issue is to work together to find a way forward.

This is not always easy, but is always necessary.

Today:

35 Commonwealth members still retain the death penalty;

Over 40 countries still criminalise homosexuality;

Many Commonwealth citizens continue to face restrictions on their right to express themselves freely;

And others are unable to practise their chosen religion or belief;

So there is clearly much work to do.

But let us also not forget the progress we've made.

At the Heads of Government meeting in Colombo last November, Commonwealth members committed to:

- Peaceful, open dialogue and the free flow of information, through a free and responsible media.
- Recognising that the same rights and responsibilities that people have offline must also be protected online;
- increasing their efforts in protecting and promoting freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.
- continue making steps to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage;
- support conflict-affected states in the fight against sexual violence in armed conflict;
- And they recognised that gender equality and empowerment of women are at the core of human development.

And I am very encouraged that the next Commonwealth Law Ministers' meeting in Botswana in May will focus on the 'Rule of Law and Human Rights'. I hope Law Ministers will take this valuable opportunity to have a frank and open discussion on the real need for change within the Commonwealth.

So, the Commonwealth should build on all this progress and look for more opportunities to continue the discussion and help influence attitudes.

And the UK is committed to supporting that work.

To honour the values of the Charter, we will continue to speak out when basic human rights – life, liberty, and personal safety - are violated.

Recent developments - like those we've seen against the LGBT community in Uganda, Nigeria and India - are particularly worrying. I recently met with Frank Mugeshi from Uganda, who fear for his life. This cannot be right.

And therefore, the UK, with other likeminded states within the Commonwealth, will continue to press member states to recognise that there can be no justification for infringing such fundamental human rights – regardless of gender, sexuality or any other characteristic.

We also continue to call for all states, not just those in the Commonwealth, to stop the use of the death penalty.

And we also continue to work with countries to ensure they guarantee the freedom of religion or belief for all.

And as many of you know, the UK has taken a leading role to end sexual violence in conflict. At the UN General Assembly in 2013, the Foreign Secretary launched a Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, which 141 countries have now signed, including many Commonwealth countries. I very much hope that all Commonwealth countries will endorse it as soon as possible.

I am pleased that the Commonwealth agreed at last year's Heads of Government meeting to support conflict-affected states in preventing sexual violence. Commitments that incorporate the needs of women and children, and that support civil society to better monitor and document crimes of sexual violence in armed conflict.

By signing up to the Declaration, I hope that all Commonwealth members will attend the Global Summit in June that the Foreign Secretary will co-host with the Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Angelina Jolie.

This event will mark a major step forward in tackling impunity for this abhorrent crime, which perpetuates cycles of conflict and poverty, and for which few, if any, culprits are ever prosecuted.

And I'm a firm believer that the Commonwealth is well-placed to make a significant difference to this important issue of international peace and security.

But I'm also a firm believer that human rights should not be seen in isolation. They are central to strong, prosperous societies and to sustained development in the Commonwealth. And the British Government champions that argument.

That is why we launched an action plan last September, to implement the UN Guiding Principles on business and human rights. It sets out Government actions and expectations of British business to behave responsibly in the UK and internationally. And we call on all our international partners, including in the Commonwealth, to put the Guiding Principles into effect, to improve human rights and sustainable business environments the world over. It doesn't just make moral sense. It makes business sense too.

So, I hope I leave you in no doubt about the commitment of the British Government, despite the real challenges, towards promoting human rights across the Commonwealth.

Together with the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and colleagues across Government, we will continue to ensure that respect for human rights is a consistent theme running through Britain's domestic and foreign policies. It is something on which we will not compromise.

Because the aspirations of Commonwealth citizens – shared the world over - for security, stability and a better life can only truly be realised by open and democratic societies founded on values such as respect, tolerance, rule of law, freedom and equality.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR- THE RT HON BARONESS WARSI PC**

Baroness Warsi was appointed Senior Minister of State at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Minister for Faith and Communities at the Department for Communities and Local Government in September 2012.