

Reshaping a new Commonwealth

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By Derek Ingram

MANY shibboleths are being swept away in this last decade of the 20th century. One is that countries should not interfere in the internal affairs of another.

The rule has long been kept more in the breach than in the observance.

Big powers have always interfered in the affairs of smaller countries and of each other. South Africa has long experienced international interference — and justifiably so.

Non-interference is no longer a realistic proposition. Every day sovereignty is being nibbled away in our global village.

Human rights is one such area, and Commonwealth non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have had quite startling success in pushing them on to the official Harare agenda.

However, it would be unfortunate if the impression

were to be given around the world that human rights in the Commonwealth are worse than anywhere else. They are not.

By comparison with much of the non-Commonwealth world, the record is quite favourable.

Commonwealth countries hardly figured in a recent Amnesty International list of the world's really bad offenders.

If the Commonwealth acquired a bad name for human rights, the blame mainly lies with the Uganda of Idi Amin, whose regime became so notorious. Much that happens in some Commonwealth countries is still deplorable; the case of Sri Lanka today is particularly appalling. And the persecution and harassment of journalists is showing few signs of diminishing.

In matters of democracy, Commonwealth countries also have a better record than those outside.

Only three countries now have military rule. Nigeria, Ghana and Lesotho —

and all three regimes seem on the way out.

In the reshaping of the Commonwealth taking place in Harare — the new British view is that the Commonwealth is having a rebirth — there is a renewed desire to see it set an example to the world. The phrases good governance and good Government are being rather freely bandied about.

Human rights are seen as part of the package for better democracy.

They do all hang together, but the world may not be ready for all that yet. We are likely to hear strong notes of caution from some Third World countries during this meeting.

A few have already been sounded, most notably by the influential and outspoken Prime Minister of Malaysia, ~~Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad~~.

~~In a recent series of speeches he has warned against "finger-pointing Third World bashing" and said that while "we wel-~~

come the end of the Cold War, we must admit to feeling more vulnerable now".

The eagerness to move the world into good Government will need to be tempered. The practical way ahead for the Commonwealth is increased election observing and other assistance in parliamentary governing.

The plan is to set up permanent observing machinery in the Commonwealth Secretariat. It will be very necessary. With an observer group going to Zambia for the elections at the end of this month, another one going to Guyana at the end of the year! and now Lesotho requesting help with a much bigger operation involving the transition from military to civilian rule, the demands are growing.

Not to mention the increasing call for advice on parliamentary procedures, legislative drafting and the many other forms of help the Secretariat will be called on to supervise. Gemini New