

17.05.24- New status for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Parliaments will play a bigger role in preserving our freedoms in the future, or at least they will if they reform themselves, adjust to the new age of internet governance and use much smarter methods to call the Executive to account than we do at present.

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(Con)

My Lords, I declare an interest as president of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Commonwealth.

Like others, I warmly welcome the Bill. I shall talk entirely about the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association aspect and leave others to deal with the ICRC. I know it may not excite headlines, but there are some important messages about our future and the world ahead contained in this legislation. I congratulate Dame Maria Miller on her persistence in bringing it forward—because of course it is not a new Bill or a new idea—and I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady D’Souza, on promoting it in her excellent opening speech.

There are those who belittle the Commonwealth as a yesterday affair, but this really betrays a total misunderstanding of the way in which the world is going and the Commonwealth is evolving, and of its centrality to Britain’s position in an utterly transformed world. The CPA is a network within an even bigger—indeed, gigantic—network covering almost a third of humankind. Our late Queen called the Commonwealth an entirely new conception and

“in many ways the face of the future”.

Obviously, it is so statistically, since 66% of its 2.6 billion members are under 29. Far from declining or failing, it is actually growing in membership, with more states applying or interested all the time. In fact, it has become, and has been described by experts as, a haven for independent nations, large and small, young and older—the so-called “neo non-aligned countries”—in what is seen as a divided world of great power hegemonies, from both of which they want to stay as clear as possible.

In a multipolar and populist-driven age, international organisations are becoming much less the monopolies of Governments and remote officialdom and far more the province of popular involvement and influence

of peoples as well as Governments—that is, of soft power and understanding as against openly aggressive positions and disputes. So here is an increasing middle ground between citizens and the state, the public and the Executive, with dwindling trust on either side. On that middle ground sit parliamentary institutions of many shapes and sizes. So it is vital that Commonwealth Parliaments should have their proper status and platform in the changing global democratic architecture, both drawing from it and giving strength to it, as the noble Baroness, Lady Taylor, rightly emphasised. The Bill greatly helps to consolidate that status.

I know that diplomats, even in our own great Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, are sometimes puzzled by the Commonwealth's status, being half a people's affair, half governmental and official. They are puzzled by where and how it fits in to the transformed international order, if order is what we call it. The Bill will remind everyone that in this new landscape, the associations and alliances of peoples that endure will be those that are voluntary, like-minded, not overcentralised, and generally upholding the rule of law, implemented by independent judiciaries.

Maybe Commonwealth Governments and leaders differ and argue, as they do, on specific issues, but what unites them is now becoming stronger all the time than what pulls them apart, because it is rooted in the ancient principles emanating from this old nation of ours, established painfully over centuries; namely, free speech, parliamentary government and democratic practices, which of course means not just elections but the behaviour of democracies, by which I mean the upholding of human rights, courtesy, honesty in presenting issues to the people, respect, good manners—very important—and many other qualities you cannot actually enshrine in law but are essential to make democracies and parliamentary systems work. Of course, most of the Commonwealth is bound by the common language of English, which is now the protocol of the planet.

Parliaments will play a bigger role in preserving our freedoms in the future, or at least they will if they reform themselves, adjust to the new age of internet governance and use much smarter methods to call the Executive to account than we do at present. We will find that the Commonwealth will play a larger, not a smaller, role in the future international networks of the parliaments of this planet. This Bill brings that future, clouded though it may sometimes seem by the present global turmoil and troubles, a little nearer and it deserves our strongest support and commitment, without doubt or hesitation.
