

Why the Commonwealth is back



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For Commonwealth sceptics and nay-sayers, there are plenty of negative current developments to chew on.

Gabon, one of the newest of its 56 members, has undergone a military coup last month. Uganda is going ahead with deeply illiberal legislation on LGBT rights. The Commonwealth Games are without a home. India, roughly half the Commonwealth in population terms, is playing on both sides of the global political divide. It consorts with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the faintly absurd enlarged BRICS movement — both rabidly anti-Western and Chinese dominated. Yet India also hosted the G20 (with Chinese and Russian presidents both absent) only a few weeks later. South Africa seems to be snuggling up to Russia. Canada is accusing fellow-member India of sanctioning political murder on its soil. Ambivalence amongst Commonwealth members towards Russia's criminal assault on Ukraine is widespread. Chinese involvement and money is at the door of, or already within, almost every member that is also a small island or coastal state.

Yet oddly, and almost counter-intuitively, the Commonwealth cause and case seems to be on the upswing, both in terms of its relevance to the new and transformed geopolitical order and as a factor in British strategic concerns.

More members want to join or be associated with the Commonwealth network, some surprising ones. Even at Westminster there is an upsurge of interest. Below the superficial appearance of governmental indifference, intra-Commonwealth linkages are proliferating.

If on the political surface this seems surprising, at a deeper level the reasons become clearer.

One is that in Africa, in particular, Francophonie members are increasingly looking across at the neighbouring Anglophone network and concluding that in terms of international profile, as well as for trade and global cooperation of all kinds, it now looks a far better place to be.

Another is that in an increasingly dangerous world for smaller countries, being sucked into the hegemonies of either China or modern America is something they would prefer to avoid, and the Commonwealth looks a potentially safer haven from which to draw the best from both sides without becoming too entangled with either “camp”. (This depends to some degree on the perception by members around the world of Britain’s stance, to which we return below).

A third consideration is that with Africa rising, and with the African Union now joining the G20 *en bloc*, there are opportunities for members of the Commonwealth “club” to caucus — whether at the UN, or in other fora springing up, such as the clumsily named giant trading group, CPTPP. This is fast opening the way for a new African voice and influence for newcomers and existing members alike.

A fourth consideration might be that while values and soft power have been the currency of the Commonwealth in recent years, the security significance of the network is suddenly becoming apparent. The changed UN Law of the Seas gives strategic relevance to many of the smaller members, whether via maritime positioning, critical minerals access or connection with the satellite world above. Defence and security officials, who have never given much thought to this aspect (unlike their more switched-on Chinese counterparts) are just beginning to see the importance of the whole gigantic, and hopefully like-minded, network, across three continents, and the crucial strategic importance of often the smallest islands and archipelagos.

In the background, although it is not widely recognised or explained in either media or political circles in the UK, the Marlborough House-based Commonwealth Secretariat, through its quiet diplomacy is constantly promoting unifying pan-Commonwealth initiatives. The causes are good

— AI cooperation across the whole network, legal training, climate and energy projects, properly tailored to the very varied needs of individual member states. All of these “gluing agents” act to bind Commonwealth interests together sub-governmentally, when so many other forces are dragging nations apart. But the communication of these things is hopeless and scarcely seems to reach Whitehall – less than a mile away across Green Park.

Matters are made worse not just by a record of Foreign Office neglect, but by active prejudice against the Secretariat and its personnel. The mandarins have never warmed to the present Secretary-General, Baroness Scotland. So they keep Marlborough House on an unnecessarily tight budgetary reign. Some of her critics openly campaigned to replace her – a campaign which completely backfired and left the UK, which at the time was actually acting as chair of the Commonwealth, with egg on its face, as well as a general loss of trust and respect in sections of the Commonwealth community.

There is then the core question of where the UK itself stands in the new pattern of global influence and interests. Is it still dutifully lined up with hard-line American ideology and rhetoric dividing East and West – even to the point of compliant subordination, crystallised in Sir Tony Blair’s phrase: “We are with you to the end”? Or has the UK understood the need for a more nuanced stance, in line with the preferences of most Commonwealth members: to be friendly partners of the United States, yes, but not satrapies.

The positioning of the UK on this subtle and novel spectrum is closely watched by our 55 Commonwealth partners. A simplistically polarised view of today’s world is simply not for them. And a Britain which looks like a US-led Western power is not for them either, especially in the age of digital empowerment and vastly greater fluidity of alliances. That world belonged to the 20th century and has now disappeared.

A further bar to a better public understanding of the value of Commonwealth membership arises from the status of the 14 Commonwealth member states or “realms” that retain the British monarch as their constitutional head of state. The monarch is represented

by Governor-Generals, who are in theory appointed by London, but in practice by member states.

Most Commonwealth member states have been republics throughout, starting with India's initial decision under Jawaharlal Nehru to stay in the Commonwealth as a Republic, not a realm. The realm status is essentially a left-over from a previous, and entirely different world, and it is natural for the remaining realms either to evolve to republic status or, of their own free will, to remain under the British Crown if that still feels comfortable. In practice the change makes little difference.

The British media resolutely refuse to explain this. So the decision of each and every realm (Barbados is the latest) to move on, retaining King Charles as Head of the Commonwealth but not as their nominal head of state, is depicted as a step towards the "breakup" of the Commonwealth itself. If anything it is the opposite, allowing states that have become republics to play a stronger role in Commonwealth affairs.

We are left with another "hangover" issue in the UK debate which continues to get an airing, although perhaps now a fading one. This is that any pivoting towards increased Commonwealth attention in British foreign policy is somehow a further move away from our EU neighbours.

Again, the opposite is nearer the mark. Even after Brexit, the EU remains a major UK export market and one where some tidying up in arrangements to improve trade flows is urgent. So, too, is close cooperation on a range of other issues, some pan-European, some more narrowly just with the EU, including the fall-out from the Withdrawal Treaties. Whether the Windsor Framework, easing trade between the UK mainland and Northern Ireland, will smooth the path further, remains a hope though still an open question.

But a stronger engagement with the rest of the Commonwealth network does not impede progress with European neighbours, or with European reform, in any way. On the contrary: generally, it reinforces the process and the will behind it.

The weakest flank of the Commonwealth case in British circles has of course been its relatively lowly position in UK export markets, dwarfed by the EU and by the United States. That is changing at record pace, because

the nature of both trade flows and investment flows is also changing equally swiftly. Asia House in London has been particularly effective in ramming home this message, though too many analysts fix their gaze in the rear-view mirror.

Commentaries about the reversal of globalisation, the rise of “in-shoring” (now modified to “friend-shoring”) and supply chain disruption are probably exaggerated. But aggressive Chinese attitudes led by Xi Jinping have certainly checked both Chinese export expansion and direct capital investment in the West: to the US strongly, to Continental Europe less so.

This leaves exactly the gap which various Commonwealth arrangements and initiatives can fill. This may occur via more free trade agreements, such as the one being sought between the UK and India, which is proving uphill work. Or it might result from greatly increased intra-Commonwealth direct investment flows and more intense technological cooperation and combination (not least in new green technologies). Which works best will show up soon. Basically the old pattern of the UK as the source of outward capital investment and the inward recipient of commodities and foodstuffs has vaulted into reverse. The capital flows are now two-way, with the UK needing inward investment and capital from other fast growing Commonwealth states as much as, or more than, the reverse.

At root the Commonwealth issue for the UK comes down to the seriousness with which British foreign policy takes its membership of today’s Commonwealth network. We are dealing with, in the words of the late Queen Elizabeth, “an entirely new conception” in a fundamentally altered geopolitical order. The Commonwealth’s unifying forces, global relevance and probably its membership will continue to evolve regardless of the part London plays in them, whether merely reactive and marginal or vigorously innovative and creative.

This is simply because the looser, non-treaty, voluntary type of association involved in the Commonwealth is far more compatible with the multipolar world, and with the flexibilities and possibilities of the digital age of hyper-connectivity and instant communication, than the tighter treaty alliances of the past.

The cry from rising Asia used to be that it wanted to “catch up” with the West. Now it is British thinking which needs to catch up with a world continuing to evolve at headlong pace, and with it the very nature of international links, ties and relationships at every level.

Has the wake-up call arrived, either in Whitehall or at Westminster?