

**Lord Howell of Guildford.**  
**Keynote Speech to the Global Policy Insight Seminar**  
**Brexit and the Modern Commonwealth**  
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*‘Nothing like this has ever existed in history’*  
*‘A New Focus for the British People’*

I can think of no better focus for the British people, as we step out of full participation in the European Union (though not by any means in Europe) , than to dedicate ourselves to upholding and developing the Commonwealth network – nearly all democracies, or with democratic aspirations, nearly all believing in the rule of law and respect for human rights, and forming what has been called an oasis of stability stretching across a troubled world.

Of course we in Britain must take up this role in a suitably humble way. No use talking about the British Empire, or Empire 2.0. The British role and position have changed radically and must change still further. We are now the *demandeurs* , asking to be readmitted to the family and the club, after decades of relative disinterest and neglect in. Some of us thought all along, long before Brexit, that with the rise of Asia and the huge eastwards shift of world power, the day would come when we might need our true friends in the Commonwealth again, however important our immediate regional neighbours might continue to be.

Well now that day has come, with the need becoming urgent to join up with ‘old partners and new allies ’ (to use the Prime Minister’s phrase).

This is often put entirely in trade terms – the scramble to get into the great new consumer markets of the Indian sub-continent, of Asia and of Africa, which we have neglected for so long.

But here are two other aspects which underpin the case for putting stronger Commonwealth engagement at the centre of our national story.

One is security. As British reliance on the ‘bedrock’ of the USA ‘special relationship’ wobbles we need strong new friends in defence

and security round the world to stay safe. That means building up links of both the new technological kind and the conventional kind with Commonwealth partners. Closer ties should now develop in cyber space, on intelligence, in control of the hideous weapons of chemical, biological and nuclear warfare, as well as in practical military, naval and airborne collaboration.

A second factor is that the Commonwealth network, spreading its latticework of links across every continent, is a huge transmission mechanism for soft power – the very resource of which the UK is especially well-endowed.

Already the common features of the English language, English common law, British accounting standards, British professional and technical standards and underlying likemindedness act as a binding force of amazing strength. They provide a solid foundation not just for Britain's advantage but also for discharging responsibilities and duty of care towards struggling small island nations and poorer areas which rightly falls upon us. This alone gives us a role which we can fulfil with pride.

As so often in the zig-zag course of history it turns out that the very structure which seemed at one time so dated, the old British Commonwealth headed by the monarchy, turns out to be the ideally suitable framework for the digital age. Its roots lie in its increasingly empowered peoples; it demands no treaties or heavy centrally hierarchies, it has a focal point not in transient politicians but in the person of the British monarch – a role filled with exemplary skill by Queen Elizabeth II.

It has become indeed, in H.M. The Queen's deeply prescient words 'In many ways the face of the future', literally so, with 60 percent of its citizens under thirty! Others now describe it as , 'The Mother of all Networks' - and it has become that as well.

Nothing like this has ever existed in history. Empires have come and gone. Superpowers have come and gone. Networks have arrived . For nations to survive and prosper in this network world requires new agility and new kinds of statesmanship. Old notions of sovereignty

have to be shaken off even while pride and patriotism need be more extolled and valued.

The Commonwealth today is the newest and most dramatic example of a network in the modern sense which is living and growing as all networks do. The successful expansion of free trade depends not just on WTO rules but on trust and affinities between trading entities. That is the Commonwealth 'premium'- the estimate that the conduct of intra-Commonwealth trade and investment costs some 19 percent less than the global average, thanks to common language, and background legal, financial and general cultural affinities.

The Commonwealth summit and gathering of over 50 heads of government in April 2018 was rated a success. This presented a massive opportunity for Britain to set its new direction in the utterly transformed international conditions which are unfolding before us in the 21st century. Britain's withdrawal from the European Union Treaties is a part, but only a part, of this new unfolding scene.

The Commonwealth network and a vibrant flourishing Europe are not alternatives.

But one crucial and differentiating factor about the Commonwealth needs always to be born in mind. Unlike the EU it is more than an assembly of governments and officials within a strong central hierarchy. It is a network of peoples - far the largest and most extensive in the planet. And like all large networks in the modern digital age it behaves and develops in ways of which conventional thinking and conventional diplomacy find hard to explain or keep track.

The Commonwealth has emerged in the digital age in a way which is organic rather than governmental. It is increasingly woven together not so much by governmental linkages and directives but by professions, civil society and interest networks of incredible density and power, all *outside* the governmental range.

Above all we should expect to see massive connections grow between like-minded networks of democracies (the Commonwealth again for example) and the great China networks, clusters and global supply

chains now snaking across the world. These are bound to expand with the (BRI) Belt Road initiative and the tying up of Chinese, Central Asian and European markets as never before in history. And of course all this has to move forward with the necessary infrastructure of finance, trade facilitation, insurance and so on.

These connections are already producing new levels and depths of relationships between China the UK and between China and the network of Commonwealth countries.

This is the new world which leaves the old 20<sup>th</sup> century centralised European model of integration and protection far behind. Indeed, in this new age the Commonwealth has been described as the "the mother of all networks". It may not yet be quite that. But through the energy of its peoples, the understanding of its leaders and the unstoppable powers of communications technology that is what it is now destined to become.

Networks are living systems. They connect communities, groups, cells, interests, professions, projects, enterprises, inquiring and creative minds, with a frequency and intensity which has never before existed.

In the Commonwealth case there is the added immense binding power of a common working language, and the DNA within that language, which multiplies network power many times over

This means that quite regardless of any stances taken up by governments we can watch linkages and common endeavour connecting all the time between every Commonwealth country and every conceivable sector - between scientists, doctors, vets, teachers, lawyers, universities, schools, enterprise in all shapes and sizes, designers, authors, military organisations, engineers, administrators, legislators, cities and villages, youth movements, museum experts – the list is endless.

Above all this massive and unstoppable exercise in connectivity means that the Commonwealth assumes, or re-assumes, a central

place in our nation's overseas priorities and policies; it becomes a vast transmission system in the exercise of soft power.

This may not be what national governments or political leaders planned or intended. Indeed in the British case such an outcome has being actively resisted for decades until very recent times.

Some call it the fourth industrial revolution. Some call it the second globalisation wave. But whatever the label it is unquestionably the hour of the Commonwealth network, linking up no less than 2.4 billion peoples, a third of the world population, larger than any nation – even larger than Facebook!

For us here in Britain I call it the hour of the Commonwealth, and it feels good to survey the infinite opportunities for our nation which now spread out before us.

