

Outcome of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018

Background

From 16 to 20 April 2018, the leaders of Commonwealth countries met in London to discuss global issues such as climate change and human rights, in addition to succession planning for the Head of the Commonwealth role. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) focused on delivering four outcomes under the theme of working ‘towards a common future’. The desired outcomes and actions were: prosperity, by boosting intra-Commonwealth trade and investment; security and cooperation to tackle issues such as cybercrime and human trafficking; fairness, by promoting democracy across the Commonwealth; and sustainability, through building the resilience of smaller states to deal with the effects of climate change and global crises.

This Briefing examines what was agreed to at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. It also provides an overview of some of the commentary and responses to the meeting, in particular, with regard to trade and rights issues.

Outcomes of the Meeting

Prosperity

During the London meeting, the Commonwealth leaders published a final communiqué. In that communiqué, the leaders reaffirmed their commitment to an “open rules-based multilateral trading system” which considers the “special requirements of least developed countries and small and vulnerable economies”.¹ Leaders also adopted a [Declaration on the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment](#), with the goal of expanding investment and boosting intra-Commonwealth trade to US\$2 trillion by 2030.

According to the Office for National Statistics, UK exports (in goods and services) to the Commonwealth were worth £47.4 billion in 2015, which is approximately nine percent of the UK’s total exports worldwide. In the same reporting period, UK imports (in goods and services) from the Commonwealth were worth £45.6 billion, which is around eight percent of the UK total.² In comparison, UK exports (in goods and services) to the Commonwealth were worth £47.8 billion in 2014, with UK imports (in goods and services) from the Commonwealth worth £47.2 billion in the same year.³ The ONS has also reported that trade ties between the UK and the largest Commonwealth nations “remain distant” in comparison with countries in the European Union. It stated that in 2015, the UK exported £48.5 billion to Germany alone, which was more than for Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore combined, at £32.8 billion.⁴

Leaders also recognised that action was required to address the challenges facing small and vulnerable states, who they argued “continue to suffer disproportionately” from diseconomies of scales and climate events, which have “significantly and gravely impact[ed] their economies and societies”.⁵ The challenges

include unsustainable debt and limited access to development financing. Consequently, heads of government at the meeting called on the international community to support measures to alleviate these issues, including “effective debt management and transparency”.⁶

Security

At the meeting, leaders discussed security matters, including cyber security, preventing and countering violent extremism, and human trafficking. This included adopting a [Commonwealth Cyber Declaration](#), which set out a commitment to an open, democratic, peaceful and secure internet, respecting human rights and freedom of expression. In addition to adopting the declaration, member countries agreed to increase cooperation to tackle cybercrime across the Commonwealth and to voluntarily undertake national cyber risk assessments by 2020, with a view to developing or strengthening national cyber security strategies.⁷

To prevent and counter violent extremism, heads encouraged member countries to share expertise and best practise, in addition to working cooperatively with the Secretariat’s Countering Violent Extremism Unit, which was established in 2017.⁸ Heads also expressed their continued support for the United Nations Secretary-General’s [Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism](#). The Plan of Action was presented to the United Nations General Assembly on 15 January 2016, and provides more than 70 recommendations to United Nations member states to prevent violent extremism.⁹

Heads of government also called for measures to eradicate forced labour, to end modern slavery and human trafficking, and to secure the prohibition and elimination of child labour in all its forms by 2025. Members were encouraged to endorse the [Call to Action to End Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking](#), which was presented at the 72nd meeting of the UN General Assembly in September 2017, and to both ratify and implement relevant outstanding international agreements. Leaders also agreed to eliminate child sexual exploitation online by joining relevant international bodies and initiatives.¹⁰

Fairness

At the London meeting, leaders discussed the promotion of democracy across the Commonwealth. They stated in their final communiqué that the full social, economic and political participation of all citizens of the Commonwealth, irrespective of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or other status, was essential for both democracy and sustainable development to “thrive”.¹¹ As part of this, heads of government committed to ratifying and implementing the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) through legislation, policies and programmes which promote both gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in social, economic and political life. The Convention—adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979—calls on signatories to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms, such as incorporating the principle of equality into their legal system and abolishing all discriminatory laws.¹²

The final communiqué also stated that leaders would seek to strengthen democratic institutions and to promote peace by adopting the [Revised Commonwealth Guidelines on Election Observation](#) in member countries.¹³ The Guidelines detail the process of establishing Commonwealth observer groups, their composition and their terms of reference.

In addition, heads of government recognised that migration can “improve the resilience and inclusive growth of member countries and lead to sustainable development”. Therefore, they called on member

countries to strengthen the international response to the “large movement of refugees” in the run up to the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) at the 2018 UN General Assembly.¹⁴ The Compact will include a comprehensive refugee response framework, as already previously agreed by member states of the United Nations in 2016, and a programme of action drawing upon good practices from around the world.¹⁵

Sustainability

The leaders’ statement “recognise[d] the threat of climate change” on the world and smaller states.¹⁶ They contended that without “urgent action” to mitigate climate change, the impact of it could push an additional 100 million people into poverty by 2030.¹⁷ Consequently, leaders at the meeting renewed their commitment under the [Paris Agreement](#) of 2016 to keep the increase in global average temperature to below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

In addition, heads “expressed alarm” at the “deteriorating health” of the world’s oceans, which they stressed was impacting every country in the Commonwealth.¹⁸ In their final communiqué they identified several pressures on oceans, such as climate change, rising sea levels and acidification and overfishing, and called for “coordinated global action”.¹⁹ Consequently, leaders adopted the [Commonwealth Blue Charter](#), which sets out the principles by which Commonwealth member countries will lead international efforts by protecting oceans.²⁰ Heads of government also agreed to establish action groups on ocean issues, which would involve member countries collaborating with partners at national, regional and international level to identify and address ocean issues.

Heads emphasised their continued support for the work of organisations such as the World Health Organisation and for international efforts to tackle serious health issues, which have had a “significant socio-economic impact” on member countries and their citizens.²¹ They agreed to achieve compliance with International Health Regulations, to accelerate universal health coverage, to strengthen health systems and to integrate services which promote prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and palliative care. Leaders also committed to halve cases of malaria across the Commonwealth by 2023, and committed to act towards achieving access to eye care for all, including eliminating blinding trachoma by 2020.²²

In relation to access to education, heads undertook to invest in teachers, educational facilities and to focus on education reforms to provide the opportunity for at least 12 years of education and learning for girls and boys by 2030.

Head of the Commonwealth Succession

At the meeting heads of governments discussed succession plans for the Head of the Commonwealth role. On 19 April 2018, the current Head of the Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth II, addressed heads of government at the meeting. In her address, Queen Elizabeth II, stated that it was her “sincere wish” that, one day, His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, Prince Charles, would succeed her as the Head of the Commonwealth.²³ The following day, the heads of government released a statement formally announcing that Prince Charles will become the next Head of the Commonwealth. In their statement, leaders said that they “recognise the role of the Queen in championing the Commonwealth and its peoples. The next head of the Commonwealth shall be his Royal Highness Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales”.²⁴

Commentary

Both CHOGM 2018 and the UK's role as Commonwealth chair-in-office have drawn praise from a number of organisations and commentators. Following the meeting, the British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and British Ambassador to the Maldives, James Dauris, wrote an article on Gov.uk stating that the meeting “showed how effectively the Commonwealth can unite its 53 member states around issues of common concern”.²⁵ Mr Dauris stated that CHOGM had provided Commonwealth countries with the opportunity for discussions on “boosting trade and investment” within the association and that “part of its [the Commonwealth] strength lies in so many of its members shared instincts about the importance of open societies and open economies”.²⁶ Similarly, Lord Purvis of Tweed (Liberal Democrat) described the UK's role as Commonwealth chair-in-office as a “unique opportunity” for the UK to “lead the way in terms of making trade and development a top priority within the Commonwealth's mandate”.²⁷ In addition, former United Nations Under Secretary General and current Indian Congress Member of Parliament, Shashi Tharoor, stated in an article in the *Independent* that once the UK leaves the EU, the UK's role in the Commonwealth can lead to it seeking new partnerships with other Commonwealth nations, such as India, “to the mutual benefit of both”. Consequently, Mr Tharoor contended that “shared opportunities and challenges” for both countries, particularly, in tackling climate change and pursuing clean growth, “offer a way forward”.²⁸

Lord Howell of Guildford (Conservative), who is the President of the Royal Commonwealth Society, described the meeting as a “summit with a difference”, which offered “an outreach to peoples, to civil society, to business, to a thousand and one interests outside”.²⁹ Lord Howell stated that this was the case because the Commonwealth “does spread and reach far beyond governments and has a very different structure to some of the intergovernmental and multinational patterns of the 21st century”.³⁰ The Commonwealth was “a huge network. It is not just a gathering of heads of government. It is mainly non-governmental, grassroots based and multi-linked”.³¹

CHOGM 2018 was praised for actions to tackle global issues. For example, American philanthropist and humanitarian, Bill Gates, wrote an article in the *Telegraph*, to commend the role of the Commonwealth meeting in tackling global issues such as malaria. In his article, Mr Gates described the association as a “powerful engine of progress” and contended that “there aren't many organisations that bring together countries from all over the world on an equal footing to talk about a shared vision for the future”.³² As described above, at the meeting leaders committed to halve cases of malaria across the Commonwealth by 2023.³³

However, the meeting also drew criticism, particularly about rights and discrimination in Commonwealth countries. For example, ahead of the meeting, concerns were raised that LGBT rights were not on the Commonwealth meeting agenda. The concern was echoed in parliamentary debates in the lead-up to the meeting.³⁴ According to the Royal Commonwealth Society, at present, 37 of the 53 Commonwealth nations have legislation which “still criminalises sexual or gender diverse people”.³⁵ Following the meeting, on 23 April 2018, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, made a written statement to the House of Commons about the meeting. In her statement, Mrs May noted that leaders had agreed “a range of actions to build a Commonwealth which is fairer, more sustainable, more secure and more prosperous”.³⁶ As part of her ambition to make the Commonwealth fairer, the Prime Minister announced during the meeting that the Government would be introducing a programme of support for any Commonwealth member wanting to reform what she described as “outdated” legislation that permitted discrimination, including against same-sex relations.³⁷ In a speech to the Joint Forum Plenary on 17 April, Mrs May stated that “nobody should face persecution or discrimination because of who they are or who they love”.³⁸ Responding to the Prime Minister's speech, the human rights activist, Peter Tatchell stated that the programme of support was “positive and welcome”.³⁹ Mr Tatchell had

submitted a petition about LGBT rights to the Commonwealth's headquarters ahead of the meeting and held a protest rally outside the meeting on 19 April 2018.⁴⁰

There had also been criticism that the meeting had ignored freedom of religion and belief and the rights of older people. In an article for PoliticsHome on faith and human rights in the Commonwealth, Baroness Berridge (Conservative) wrote that "it was disappointing to note" that the issue of freedom of religion and belief was not mentioned in the meeting's final communiqué.⁴¹ Baroness Berridge contended that the absence of a discussion on freedom of religion and belief at the meeting was "especially concerning" considering the 2015 Heads of Government Meeting in Malta did so, and that she hoped that this did not result in the Government "placing diminishing importance on freedom of religion and belief during their time as Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth".⁴² However, in response to an oral question asked by Baroness Berridge on the subject on 25 April 2018, the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, said that during the meeting, the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, had announced a £4 million accountable democracy programme, which would see the UK work with Commonwealth organisations and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, focusing on the political participation of marginalised groups, including religious minorities and women in the Commonwealth.⁴³

Writing on the Huffington Post website, the managing director of Age International, Chris Roles, questioned why the rights of older people were missing from the agenda at the meeting. Mr Roles stated that the meeting placed an emphasis on youth, which was "understandable given that 60 percent of the Commonwealth's population are aged under 30".⁴⁴ However, he contended that it also demonstrated a "short sightedness that overlooks older generations", with millions of people in the Commonwealth entering later life "with little or no income security" and therefore, "risk experiencing desperate poverty".⁴⁵

Further Information

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- ² Office for National Statistics, [‘Commonwealth Trade in Focus as UK Prepares for Brexit’](#), 9 March 2017.
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- ¹⁷ Commonwealth, [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting Communiqué: “Towards a Common Future”](#), 20 April 2018, p 5.
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- ²⁵ James Dauris, [‘A Revitalised and Relevant Commonwealth’](#), 1 May 2018.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*
- ²⁷ Lord Purvis of Tweed, [‘CHOGM 2018 is a Milestone in Terms of Opportunity for the Commonwealth’](#), PoliticsHome, 16 April 2018.
- ²⁸ Shashi Tharoor, [‘There Can Be No Empire 2.0—But There Can Be A New Commonwealth’](#), *Independent*, 19 April 2018.
- ²⁹ [Debate on ‘Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018’](#), *HL Hansard*, 22 March 2018, col 426.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*
- ³¹ *ibid.*
- ³² Bill Gates, [‘Commonwealth Countries Are Key in the Global Fight Against Malaria’](#), *Telegraph*, 18 August 2018.
- ³³ *ibid.*
- ³⁴ House of Lords Library, [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018](#), 14 March 2018
- ³⁵ Royal Commonwealth Society, [‘LGBT Rights: A Commonwealth Approach to LGBT Equality’](#), accessed 30 April 2018. For further information on the subjects raised before the meeting, see: House of Lords Library, [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018](#), 14 March 2018.
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- ³⁸ Pippa Crear, [‘Theresa May Says She Deeply Regrets Britain’s Legacy of Anti-gay Laws’](#), *Guardian*, 17 April 2018.
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