

The Commonwealth

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This Paper gives a brief history of the Commonwealth and an overview of the role of the organisation today.

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I Background

The Commonwealth has always been a flexible organisation, reflecting a range of constitutional and historical links with the British Crown.

The term 'Commonwealth' originated in the 15th century as an English equivalent to the Latin *res publica*, meaning the public good, or 'common weal', and has been used to describe many different political systems. It was first used to describe the British Empire by Lord Rosebery in a speech in Adelaide in 1884; General JC Smuts coined the phrase 'the British Commonwealth of Nations' to embrace the Dominions (parts of the Empire which had full internal self-government and degrees of latitude in foreign affairs) in 1917.¹ By the 1920s, there were six Dominions: Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Irish Free State. These were, with the United Kingdom,

autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate to one another in any aspect of their domestic or internal affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth.²

Throughout the early years of this century ambiguities remained over the precise meaning of terms such as 'dominion' and 'commonwealth' and how they might differ from 'colony' or 'empire'. Nevertheless, it was clear that the use of 'commonwealth' was intended to encourage different connotations to those of 'empire'. The shift in language appeared to tie in with the ideology of a shared liberal destiny for the Empire, and this gradually translated into fact.

The Dominions were granted full legislative independence under the *Statute of Westminster, 1931*, a special Act of Parliament which consolidated the independent status of the Dominions by giving effect to resolutions of the Imperial Conferences of 1926 and 1930. No longer could the British Parliament enact laws which would have effect in the Dominions, nor could it void those of the Dominions' laws which were repugnant to it.³ The preamble to the *Statute of Westminster* referred to 'the British Commonwealth of Nations', meaning the independent Dominions: the identity of the Commonwealth was hardening as a group of former colonies still owing some kind of allegiance to the British Crown, and enjoying a more

¹ On the blurred origins of the Commonwealth see 'What's in a Name?: A Perspective on the Transition of Empire/Commonwealth, 1918-50', Sturgis J, *Round Table*, April 1995.

² Report of the Inter-Imperial Relations Committee of the Imperial Conference of 1926 (Cmd 2768), cited in *Halsbury's Statutes of England and Wales*, 4th ed, 1985, vol 7 p4.

³ The Dominions adopted the provisions of the Statute of Westminster with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and the whole progress to independence of these countries was more gradual and indeterminate than was the case with the post-War decolonisations. The latter were characterised by a period of internal self-government, a constitutional conference and an independence act in the British Parliament which created a clean break.

mature and symbiotic relationship than within the Empire. With the independence and partition of India in 1947, the modern identity of the Commonwealth was cemented and the adjective 'British' was dropped from official use.⁴ In 1949, again following developments in India, it was accepted that republican status should not be an obstacle to membership. This allowed recognition of the British Monarch as Head of the Commonwealth, a purely formal title, without any constitutional implications. Members of the Commonwealth recognise the British Monarch as the symbol of their free association, regardless of any other constitutional role she may or may not play in relation to them individually.

Through the 1960s and 1970s the Commonwealth grew with waves of African, Asian, Caribbean and Oceanic nations gaining independence and joining the organisation. Today there are 53 member states, with a total population of around 1.5bn, and representation on every continent (though no members in the Middle East). The Queen is Head of State of 16 members of the Commonwealth: in these, other than the United Kingdom, she is represented personally by a Governor-General, who is appointed on the advice of the Government of the country concerned and has no link with the British Government. Governors-General perform roughly similar functions to the British Monarch and, with the notable exception of the Governor-General of Australia during the Whitlam Affair in 1975, they are largely uncontroversial figures, providing, ideally, a symbol of continuity above the political fray. The Commonwealth also includes 32 republics and five countries with monarchs other than the Queen.

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association and, although it has a Secretariat, it does not have a charter. Its most formal political activity is the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the successor to a long line of similar meetings stretching back to the Colonial Conferences which began in 1887, and taking their present form since 1971. A number of CHOGMs have produced Declarations indicating the shared values and priorities of member states. A *Declaration of Commonwealth Principles* was adopted at the CHOGM in Singapore in 1971, and this is often regarded as the organisation's most fundamental document.

The last CHOGM was held in Auckland, New Zealand, from 10-13 November 1995. The next will be held in Edinburgh from 24-27 October 1997.

⁴ For instance, when the Dominions Office became the Commonwealth Relations Office, the adjective 'British' was not appended in the name, and Prime Minister Atlee announced the change as a means of conveying the correct impression' of the relations between the United Kingdom and the other members of the Commonwealth' (HC Deb 2 July 1947, c1320).

II Selected Commonwealth Bodies

The **Commonwealth Secretariat** was established by the Heads of Government in 1965. It organises consultative and cooperative activities and acts as a central administrator for Commonwealth business, but it does not have powers of initiative in relation to high level policy. The head of the Secretariat is the Secretary-General, currently Chief Emeka Anyaoku, who is elected by the Heads of Government. His three deputies have responsibility for political affairs, economic and social affairs and development cooperation. There are 13 divisions, covering such matters as legal and constitutional affairs, women's and youth affairs, science and technology and a range of economic questions.

The budget for the Secretariat for 1996-97 was around £10m, paid for according to a scale of assessments related to income and population. The UK pays 30% of the total.⁵ The Political Affairs Division is responsible for Commonwealth election monitoring, as well as organising CHOGMs and other meetings on political matters. It also maintains an office at the United Nations in New York which can be used by smaller member states who could not otherwise afford representation at the UN. Other divisions offer training opportunities, seminars and study visits, and organise cooperative projects, especially in development work. In this area there is a Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, which has an annual budget of around £25m, to which the UK again contributes 30%.

There are many other Commonwealth bodies, such as CAB (Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux) International, an international organisation concerned with sustainable development through agriculture, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (a centre for postgraduate study on Commonwealth topics in Russell Square), and other Societies and Associations in fields such as health, education, law, public administration, science, the media and youth development.

The **Commonwealth Parliamentary Association** (CPA) brings together parliamentarians from around the Commonwealth. It was formed in 1911 to promote understanding and cooperation between the Parliaments of the Commonwealth and now has over 130 branches. It holds an annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference and organises other seminars on a variety of themes, as well as providing information services on the Commonwealth and parliamentary topics.

As the Commonwealth continues to expand and its members continue to experience transitions from one form of governance to another, the CPA has a role in sharing experience with

⁵ Further details on the British contribution can be found in the FCO's *1997 Departmental Report*, Cm 3603, March 1997, pp55-6, 62 & 131.

parliamentarians from such countries. An important part of its work takes the form of seminars at which members from the more mature democracies discuss with and advise politicians and officials in the host country on some of the problems they may expect to face and some of the models which have been developed elsewhere for dealing with them. With Nigeria, Sierra Leone and the Gambia all experiencing periods of military rule currently or recently and other members likely to experience constitutional changes and developments in the years to come, this kind of work will continue to be of importance.

The **Commonwealth Institute** was established in 1893 as the Imperial Institute and moved to its current Kensington High Street location in 1962. It has combined a permanent exhibition and other short-term exhibitions and artistic performances with educational activities, workshops, seminars and conferences.

There has been controversy over the funding of the Institute. A number of Commonwealth countries contributed substantially to the cost of the building and the creation of the collections, but in recent years almost all the recurrent funding has been provided in the form of an annual grant from the British Government, falling to the FCO external relations vote.⁶ This reached £3.6m in 1993-94.

On 21 September 1993 the Government announced its intention to cease funding the Institute in 1996. Following this announcement there was a good deal of discussion about the future of the Institute and of its buildings. It was estimated that the building required a minimum of £3m worth of essential repairs to bring it to an acceptable state and that desirable repairs and refurbishment would cost £8-10m. The matter was complicated by the fact that the building has Grade II listed status and that the existence of the Institute is based on the *Commonwealth Institute Act, 1958*, which would have to be amended or repealed if the Institute were to close completely.

Lord Armstrong was asked to conduct a review of the Institute, and he presented his findings on 31 March 1993.⁷ He set out four possible ways forward. The first two involved a continuation of Government funding at the existing or a higher level and appeared to have been rejected. The third option was that the Institute would continue as a legal entity, but seek to transfer its collections and some of its educational functions to another museum, vacating the Kensington buildings for an alternative use. This option does not appear to have been pursued. The fourth option would be closure.

⁶ Supply Estimates, Class II, Vote 2. The *Supply Estimates 1997/98* are available as HC 335 of March 1997.

⁷ Dep 2/10342.

The Government's favoured option was for the Institute to seek private funding in order to continue its presence in Kensington. In an Adjournment Debate of 31 March 1994 on the general future of the Commonwealth Mr Lennox-Boyd said,

we want the Institute to use the fine building on Kensington High Street, provided by the Government, to promote the Commonwealth but to draw after 1996 on non-Government funds to do so.⁸

By continuing funding until March 1996 the Government sought to allow time for the Trustees to explore their options. The minister also mentioned that the Government had recently made an extra £2.4m available to meet redundancy costs at the Institute.

On 13 July 1994, Mr Lennox-Boyd announced additional funding of £2.4m for the triennium 1996-99.⁹ This money was intended to enable the Institute to 'regenerate its galleries and become self-supporting by March 1999'. It was dependent on a further £5m being raised in sponsorship and self-financing by July 1995 and satisfactory building and maintenance plans being submitted. Critics pointed out that this compared unfavourably with the £6m the Institute would have received if the previous level of support had been maintained over the same period. The Institute was not able to raise the required £5m by July 1995, nor by the end of a six month extension period which the Government offered.

In March 1996 the Foreign Secretary announced that an additional grant of £1.5m was to be made to allow one further year of operating, but that no assurances could be given over the continued public funding of the running costs of the Institute beyond March 1997.

However, in a Written Answer of 30 January 1997, Mr Rifkind announced further funding up to 1999:

I value the work of the Commonwealth Institute and recognise the efforts it has made to modernise its operations, increase revenue and seek private sector investment. I am therefore pleased to confirm that we have decided to give the institute a grant in aid of £800,000 for the financial year 1997-98; and £600,000 for the year 1998-99. The question of funding beyond 1999 will be subject to normal public expenditure constraints and procedures. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue to support the institute's attempts to obtain further private sector investment.¹⁰

Before this announcement *The Times* reported that, 'the Institute insists that it was given until 1999 to become self-supporting, and that moving the date forward means that it now faces

⁸ HC Deb, c1105.

⁹ HC Deb, cc980-1.

¹⁰ HC Deb, c323w.

total closure'.¹¹ The same article noted that the staff of the Institute had fallen to 26 from 96 in 1993. The Foreign Affairs Committee commented that

if by the end of 1996, the Institute has not secured private finance sufficient to give it a reasonable prospect of being self-financed from April 1997, there must be a real prospect of permanent closure. This must be avoided.¹²

Supporters would forward similar arguments for the future after 1999.

The exhibition galleries were closed from the beginning of 1996. There is some controversy over the circumstances of this closure. In oral evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 19 December 1995 the Foreign Secretary said:

what we have said is that with regard to the Commonwealth Institute in London the galleries, which were having to close in any event because of a need for refurbishment, are being closed, I hope, temporarily, while further work is done to identify sponsorship. That does not apply to the educational work or the Conferences of the Commonwealth Institute.¹³

The FCO's *1996 Departmental Report* states that,

in a message to the Institute's AGM on 5 December 1995, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary regretted that the Institute had not so far secured sponsorship to redevelop its galleries and proposed that they close temporarily while the search for sponsorship continued. The education, library and conference operations will be financed in 1996-97 from the Institute's own earned resources supplemented by Government funds to pay essential salary costs and maintain the Institute building. This will allow the Institute to continue its major programmes (education, library and conference operations), and provides a further year to put the organisation on a new footing, better adapted to modern ways of projecting the Commonwealth and its members.¹⁴

By contrast, spokesmen for the Institute were reported as claiming that the galleries were closed for the foreseeable future, but that there had been no intention to close all of them anyway. A special exhibition, on Malaysia, has now been arranged and is scheduled to open on 24 May 1997.

11 11 March 1996.

12 *The Future Role of the Commonwealth*, Foreign Affairs Committee, First Report of 1995-96, HC 45, 27 March 1996, para 143.

13 HC 45-iii 1995-96, Q312.

14 Cm 3203, March 1996, pp 63-4.

III Expansion

The Commonwealth is still developing, as several new admissions in recent years indicate. A significant event was the readmission of South Africa. Hendrik Verwoerd took South Africa out of the organisation on 31 May 1961, turning a likely expulsion into an act of defiance; Nelson Mandela led the new South Africa back into the organisation on 1 June 1994, completing a symbolic return to the international fold.¹⁵ The Commonwealth has also contemplated the admission of new members which are not former British colonies.

Several such countries in Africa have sought membership. Namibia was admitted in 1990, never having been a British dependency. Its former relationship with South Africa could be seen as grounds for admission parallel to those of former dependencies of Australia and New Zealand, since it was administered by South Africa as a League of Nations mandate. However, it had an ambiguous status after the birth of the UN, and the South African presence was finally declared illegal by the UN Security Council in 1970.

Cameroon and Mozambique were admitted to the Commonwealth in 1995. Cameroon includes part of the former League of Nations mandate/UN Trust Territory of the British Cameroons, which joined the independent state of Cameroon in 1961, that state having been the former French Cameroons until 1960. Mozambique was never part of the British Empire: its links with the Commonwealth date from its independence in 1975 and arose from its position as a 'frontline state' at a time when the Commonwealth was preoccupied with the implications of the situation in South Africa.

Angola, Yemen, Eritrea, Rwanda and the Palestinian Authority have also shown an interest in joining. Many of the newer and prospective members see joining the Commonwealth as part of the symbolism of state legitimacy, following the changes which have taken place in their countries. A range of improbable contenders could be imagined on the basis of a brush with the British Empire, but only those who see it as being in their interests to join will do so. China is hardly likely to seek to use the Hong Kong connection to follow Cameroon into the Commonwealth, and Burma is a precedent for a former colony not joining after achieving independence.

¹⁵ Other withdrawals were those of Ireland in 1949 and Pakistan in 1972. Pakistan rejoined in 1989. Fiji's membership lapsed in 1987 after the declaration of a republic following a coup: it is normal for states becoming republics to seek approval for their continued membership, and this was not done. Nigeria was suspended in 1995.

'Non-traditional' members and aspirants also see the Commonwealth as a means of cementing their relationships with other developing countries, and of forging a link with the UK (and hence the EU) and other developed economies, such as Australia and Canada. The view in the organisation itself has been that a fairly widespread use of English and a commitment to human rights and democracy are sufficient in principle to allow membership. Cameroon's efforts to join were held up by concerns over its human rights record, but on 1 November 1995 the country was admitted to the Commonwealth, six years after its initial application. The application of Mozambique was accepted shortly after, at the Auckland CHOGM, as an exceptional case, and the Secretary-General was requested to set up an intergovernmental group to advise on criteria for assessing future applications. The Inter-governmental Group on the Criteria for Commonwealth Membership has since been established and comprises representatives of all those countries which have hosted CHOGMs in the past.¹⁶ Its report will be considered at Edinburgh.

¹⁶ For its deliberations see, 'Criteria for Commonwealth Membership', Collinge J, *Round Table*, July 1996.

IV Attitudes Abroad

Africa, and in particular the south, is perhaps the area where the Commonwealth is seen in the most positive light today. African leaders feel themselves weakened in international terms by the loss of superpower interest and rivalry played out in their continent, by the diminishing level of shared interests with Asia and by the arguably more inward gaze of Europe. The rapid economic development of much of Asia, the development of the European Union, the opening of Eastern Europe to aid and trade links, as well as the security concerns there, and the continuing importance of events in the Middle East, have all served to squeeze Africa out of the main focus of international attention. As a result of this sense of marginalisation, and perhaps paradoxically, what seems to some a relic of Empire, is to others an opportunity for national self-promotion.

The Commonwealth appears to some African leaders as a channel through which they may make their voices heard. It is not the only channel for former colonies of the European powers: the link between the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) countries and the EU under the Lomé apparatus is more inclusive and it has more direct implications for trade. States with membership in both the Commonwealth and the ACP tend not to regard the two as competing fora, however, but rather regard the British presence within the EU as an important protection of their interests.

Other options include the grouping of former French colonies and French-speaking countries and regions, la Francophonie. This has been very much a French initiative, and France still tends to take a paternalistic view of its former colonies. Cameroon was always keen to maintain its separation from France when membership of la Francophonie appeared its most obvious alliance, but it was happy to join the Commonwealth once internal developments made this a possibility. While la Francophonie lacks the broader, non-governmental and cooperative aspect of the Commonwealth, and it is a much more recent invention (meeting regularly at Heads of State level only since 1986), it can be put forward as evidence that the Commonwealth is not merely the product of Anglocentric nostalgia.

V Harare Declaration

The role of the Commonwealth today has come to include the promotion of democracy and human rights, principles enshrined in the 1991 *Harare Declaration*, adopted at the CHOGM in Zimbabwe that year. The areas listed at Harare in which the Commonwealth would work with 'renewed vigour' opened with

the protection and promotion of the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth:

democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government;

fundamental human rights, including equal rights and opportunities for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief.¹⁷

These principles have come to form part of the basis for British aid policy. Although the organisation has little material sanction when respect for these principles breaks down, it can provide a source of moral pressure and a channel of communication.

The Auckland CHOGM of November 1995 saw developments in this area. The *Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme on the Harare Commonwealth Declaration* was adopted, and offered mechanisms to promote adherence to the Harare principles, including measures which might be taken in response to a violation. This represented a modest development towards a greater level of political coordination among the members of the Commonwealth than had sometimes been the case in the past. A Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) was set up to oversee measures in the case of serious or persistent violation of the Harare principles. This includes Foreign Ministers from eight countries (including the UK), to be supplemented as appropriate by representatives from the region concerned. As James Barber pointed out in the *World Today*, the 1990s have seen a general concern for human rights and good governance replace the concern over racism which animated the Commonwealth from the early 1960s until the onset of liberalisation in South Africa. And if,

in the struggle against racism, it had been South Africa; in the struggle for human rights, it is Nigeria.¹⁸

If the focus on the former sometimes led to awkward feelings on the part of the British, the focus on the latter has certainly led to mixed feelings among the African states. At and immediately following the Auckland CHOGM, South Africa took the lead in condemning the military régime in Nigeria, while neighbouring states such as Sierra Leone, the Gambia and

¹⁷ *Harare Declaration*, as reproduced in *The Commonwealth Yearbook, 1993-94*.

¹⁸ 'Reaching for Values: the Commonwealth and Nigeria', Barber J, *The World Today*, January 1997.

Ghana were less strident. Some neighbouring countries have their own sensitivities over questions of democracy, and others are concerned not to antagonise a powerful regional player and risk disrupting further an area of great volatility. In time South Africa came to tone down its approach as well: there remains a divergence between those in the ANC who feel it is wrong to vilify a black African régime, representing a country which was a staunch ally during the apartheid era, and those who perceive a greater obligation to oppose unjust forms of governance wherever they occur.

Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth at the Auckland CHOGM in 1995 over its continued military rule and human rights abuses, and the executions of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other minority rights activists. It became the main focus of the CMAG initiative, under which representatives of eight countries were to consider developments in Nigeria and also in the Gambia and Sierra Leone. The limitations on Commonwealth action have become increasingly evident here. While CMAG at first seemed a fairly powerful response to the Nigerian problem, it has been unable to deliver real pressure as a result of the intransigence of the régime of General Sani Abacha, the qualms of African members and the non-binding nature of its decisions.

After an attempt by the Foreign Ministers of Ghana, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand and Zimbabwe to visit Nigeria was thwarted, CMAG recommended further sanctions at its second meeting, in April 1996. The recommendations included the freezing of foreign assets of the leadership, an embargo on the export of arms, and bans on sporting links and air travel. However, these were entirely optional, and the prospect of economic sanctions, including an oil embargo, was deferred pending further discussions with the EU and the USA, largely on British insistence. Canada and New Zealand took a more hawkish position, New Zealand's Foreign Minister Don McKinnon hinting at the possible expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth, but the divided attitudes among the membership as a whole led CMAG to turn its efforts more to the pursuit of dialogue. A meeting was held in London in June 1996 with the Nigerian Foreign Minister Tom Ikimi and a visit was made in November 1996 to Nigeria, which concluded with CMAG recommending continued dialogue: effectively the strategy has become one of 'constructive engagement', the policy which threatened to break the Commonwealth apart when it was pursued by the UK in relation to South Africa.

The most recent CMAG meeting was held in London in February 1997. The Group again delayed further action on the question of sanctions, and reacted to criticisms from the Nigerian opposition that its November 1996 trip was ineffectual and did not include meetings with their representatives. CMAG invited written submissions from interested parties, which it would consider before presenting its report to the Edinburgh CHOGM. According to comments by Canada's Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy some of those submitting written comments would be invited to address CMAG in July 1997.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Reuter News*, 19 February 1997.

VI Prospects

The Commonwealth can be viewed in three ways: culturally, politically and economically.

Traditionally, the Commonwealth has put itself forward as a model of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic cooperation. Activities such as the four-yearly Commonwealth Games or the annual Commonwealth Day help to promote this ideal. There is an emphasis on educational activities: indeed Commonwealth Day is observed each year on the second Monday in March, which is a schoolday throughout the Commonwealth, partly in order to allow children to focus on the Commonwealth in their work on that day. In the past, this kind of activity has been regarded as well-meaning, but perhaps of less than vital importance: with the preponderance of ethnic conflict in the last three to four years, it may come to be seen in a different light.

At the political level, the organisation remains a voluntary association of states which agree to pool nothing at all of their freedom of action. As a result it does not always function well as a coordinating body, but it may be thought to have a useful function of encouraging dialogue and contact on - at least formally - equal terms. It also serves as one of the arenas in which certain dominant values may be articulated, values which seem to form part of the orthodoxy of a particular historical period, such as support for peaceful and constitutionally-based progress to independence, or anti-racism, or respect for human rights, and to which the member states seek to present their actions as approximating.²⁰ It may be easy to dismiss this as part of the ceremonial function of the two-yearly CHOGM, a simulation of a unity which is actually missing, but there is nevertheless an opportunity to express and contest large ideas and to seek to apply them to specific issues, and to some extent a broad community of value may be encouraged in these contacts. The importance of the attempt to project a specifically Anglophone set of values can perhaps be seen in the eagerness which France has shown in recent years to consolidate la Francophonie and to project a distinctive Francophone position in world affairs.

The Commonwealth can be seen as having an economic edge to it as well.²¹ It includes important sub-regions such as Southern Africa and South Asia. In the former, mutual

²⁰ Or in the case of Nigeria, which they seek to present as being in conflict with one another. The stress on human rights and democracy is held by the Nigerian authorities to conflict with their absolute sovereignty and to represent a form of racist interference.

²¹ A detailed discussion of the relative trade, investment and aid relationships between the UK, other OECD members in the Commonwealth and the developing countries of the Commonwealth is given in HC 45 1995-96, Chapter V.

membership of the organisation may be helpful in promoting shared interests between the countries of that area; in the latter, it may play a part in promoting dialogue and cooperation in circumstances which are otherwise less than cordial. It is unlikely that the Commonwealth will ever have a decisive role to play, say in heading off confrontation between India and Pakistan, but its supporters would argue that it does at least have a positive contribution to make.

Including the developing markets of India alongside dynamic economies such as Singapore and Malaysia, the Commonwealth presents trading and other business opportunities for the developed economies of the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The most optimistic of its advocates would doubtless regard the organisation as a balance to or a link between the groupings which tempt its members away from one another: the EU (for the UK), ASEAN and the Pacific Rim (for the South East Asian and Oceanic members) and NAFTA (for Canada and the Caribbean). Whether this hope will become reality is open to debate: the Commonwealth is not generally an organisation which can pursue an internal dynamic separate from the will of its more powerful members. Nevertheless the practice of similar legal systems and the common use of English are often cited as factors tending to facilitate contact, particularly in business.

In its Report on the *Future Role of the Commonwealth*, the Foreign Affairs Committee laid emphasis on the potential advantage to British commercial interests which the established ties within the Commonwealth provide. It sought to replace the image of a pyramidal structure, with the UK at the top devolving benefits onto a sprawling recipient group at the bottom, with an image of a network of mutually beneficial relationships, and argued that

the old Commonwealth ties could therefore become, for the United Kingdom, the new Commonwealth opportunities.²²

As the post-colonial order in which the modern Commonwealth developed is overtaken by a world of regional blocs, the organisation itself continues to develop. Given its modest institutional structure and limited resources, the Commonwealth, as identified with the Secretariat, may never play a truly leading role in world affairs, but the membership may continue to find new opportunities and see new benefits in their mutual relations.

²² HC 45 1995-96, para 9.

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