

Inaugural Biannual Commonwealth Lecture at the Bath Royal Scientific and Literary Institution, Monday November 25th 2013, by the Rt. Hon. Lord Howell of Guildford, President of the Royal Commonwealth Society and Chair of the Council of Commonwealth Societies.

Full Text

My message today is about both Britain and about the Commonwealth.

I want to share with you a picture of Britain's lucky legacy, and a description of how the trans-continental and spreading web of Commonwealth connections, embracing a third of the human race, has acquired a central and rejuvenating role in the changed global scene – becoming a potentially transforming vehicle for Britain, as for all Commonwealth members, in a deeply troubled world. And I want to show how within, through and via this newly invigorated network an agile and confident Britain can find its lost role and pathway, and bring to an end the years of national drift.

It is over six decades since Dean Acheson made his wounding speech at West Point about Great Britain having lost an Empire but not yet having found a role. I met Acheson just once, in Washington at a Georgetown dinner – he was a noble statesman of great charm. He died in 1971. For him the message now is *Requiescat In Pace*; all is OK; the role may be different – the global network asks for partners, not leaders. But it has been found. We are there – nearly. Our role is within reach.

Those who now espouse the Commonwealth cause face a constant critique. A choice, it is insisted, has to be made. But does it? The Commonwealth Mark Three today is both Anglo-centric and not Anglo-centric. It is a filigree lacework of countless bilateral and multilateral connections criss-crossing the world, by no means always including Britain, which remains just a member among more than 50, and not always a very good one in the recent past. Britain is anyway not even currently a member of the inner guiding committee, the Commonwealth Ministers' Action Group. Intra-Commonwealth

linkages crisscross the continents in a maze of new connections – Canada with the Caribbean, Australia with Africa, India with Africa, South Africa with India, Bangladesh with its Asian neighbours, for example.

Yet the British monarch is the Commonwealth's head, London is still undeniably a sort of Mecca, the Commonwealth Secretary resides in his palace in the Mall, Marlborough House, English is the working language, cricket is the game (mostly). British customs, culture, legal procedures, business standards and methods suffuse the system – and everyone likes afternoon tea on the lawn served in Worcester china. Even Robert Mugabe, who took Zimbabwe out of the Commonwealth before being asked to leave anyway, is said to be waiting for his invitation to take tea at the Palace. Alas it will never come- although we all hope that Zimbabwe will return to the Commonwealth family at the right time.

I will seek to show how, in a changed world, Britain can indeed ride two horses, how it must do so to survive, how the old choices said to confront the UK (between Europe and America, between the West and the rising East and South) no longer exist, and how the ambiguities of a role in the modern world, a role in Europe and a role in the Commonwealth can at last be resolved.

In the British case, relations with its continental neighbours will of course be close and can (and ought) to become both comfortable and, in a broad sense, settled. But although the political noise level about European affairs remains high, they are already a shrinking part of the new picture. The bigger part is being filled by a criss-cross lacework, a vast new ribbonry of connections – between Britain and the newly gigantic cities and powers of Asia, Africa and Latin America, between Britain and the wealth-laden city states of the Middle East, and between Britain and the scores of small nations which populate the global network, to which globalisation has not always been kind, and which deserve a fresh degree of respect, understanding and friendship.

The network of nations forming the modern Commonwealth system, knitted together not just by its British origins (in some cases thin to non-existent) but also by its working language and the DNA within that language, is a central feature of this new tapestry. From the diplomatic angle, the essential point to grasp is that the peoples of the Commonwealth are not foreigners, they are family. It is no accident that Britain's lead department in overseas relationships is named the Foreign *and* Commonwealth Office (although it nearly *was* an accident, narrowly avoided, when in the early 2000s some short-sighted officials in Whitehall tried to drop the Commonwealth bit, but luckily were repelled).

The governments of Commonwealth states may be unfriendly at times, critical, awkward, even hostile, but these are family matters (however strained at times), not foreign policy matters. The difference is crucial because the handling of family matters requires a quite different approach to the handling of matters either with neighbours or strangers. Commonwealth blood is thicker than international water. Instant digital connectivity has turned the Commonwealth from a yesterday club into a very live, all-powerful networked system. It is as though the withered arteries of old Commonwealth connections had all been given a huge transfusion. This is the new transformation that has not been widely understood – that we are now confronted with two worlds: the official, visible, physical world of alliances and common interests between states, and the empire of cyberspace – the vastly greater and exploding world of unofficial contacts, virtual links and connectivity at every level of human activity. The Commonwealth, almost by chance, belongs to both.

The old picture of the Commonwealth as a fading, nostalgia-ridden institution has long since crumbled under the impact of new realities. The proof of that probably comes more eloquently from the emerging figures of trade and economic performance, as will be shown, than from any sentiments, eulogies or futurology. The growth that seems to be eluding Britain's main European export market is alive and well in many of the larger Commonwealth countries. It is currently expected to be 7.2 per cent over the next five years for the whole

Commonwealth² (higher still in the main Asian economies), against a European zero, or actual shrinkage. Potential advantages of trade and business links between countries with a common working language, similar legal systems and many other familiarising ties were there long ago. But what has galvanised the pattern of transactions recently is the rise of instant and continuous communication, allowing an ease and intimacy across peoples and communities which no other international network could possibly emulate.

The great new twenty-first-century areas of growth and dynamism, the new sources of influence, wealth and trade, and the new consumer markets, now lie outside the EU and outside the North Atlantic sphere (with the exception of Canada, now becoming a major energy power). We have to secure good access to these new markets and groupings to survive. The Commonwealth network – or ‘family of people in the truest sense’, as Queen Elizabeth put it in her 2012 Christmas message – is one of several potentially advantageous routes into the new growth markets and high technology zones of Asia (Pacific, South-East, Central and Near), and increasingly of Africa as well. Indeed, the African story is taking an entirely new turn. Seen until very recently as an unending parade of stagnation, corruption and poverty, the new Africa begins to move into the wealth creation phase, lifted partly by new resources and partly by the spread of better governance and new perceptions about the mainsprings of development.

One common thread that binds most (if not all) of these potentially rich newcomers and old friends is Commonwealth membership – the network reaching far into everyday life, customs and attitudes – a good many of them originating in Britain. If, in the information age, softpower is increasingly becoming the means of advantage – promoting brand, reputation and interests and hopefully trade, as well as winning allies and subduing hostility – then here for Britain is the softpower network to beat them all. No question of trying to resurrect Pax Britannica; that’s long gone, as now has Pax Americana. We are just one member state out of the 54 with plenty to learn from the others as they expand their trade and investment links, not just with us

but with each other. For Britain, once it has navigated through the present dangerous seas, it means the nation's luck will be in – unless of course we throw it all away. Britain will be sitting plum in the midst of the world's best network, both digital and real; it will be a safe haven, even more than it is now, for the world's investors; it will be increasingly well-placed in terms of resources and energy supplies, with the ever-friendly Norwegians wanting to pipe over unlimited quantities of gas and with chains of frozen gas ships seeking our custom and sailing in, mainly now from Qatar and from Algeria, but a little while ahead also from the new rich African states, such as Mozambique and Angola (another seeker of Commonwealth tie-ups). But what can be seen is just the tip of things. As with an iceberg, it is what lies below that makes the Commonwealth so supremely relevant in the internet age. It is the Commonwealth's myriad non-governmental arteries, its incredible membrane of links at every conceivable level, from language and legal systems, to schools and universities, to medicine and accountancy, to science and climate and energy issues, to sport, to almost every profession and cultural interest, and increasingly to every sort of business and trade, that ties this network together and makes it an open avenue to the new powers and markets which we simply have to penetrate just to survive, let alone improve our fortunes. So that is the good story of where Britain is going as a nation: the purposeful and hopeful prospect, worth recounting. It means quite simply that in the totally transformed world ahead Britain is promisingly placed to be the network nation *par excellence*

Very few planned or foresaw this. On the contrary, a widespread view in the later decades of the twentieth century was that the Commonwealth had lost its relevance. It was a club of the past, a family of yesterday, held together by little more than nostalgia. Yet contrary to expectations, what is emerging instead from the old pattern is something that fits amazingly closely with the future and with the technological revolution in which the world is now caught up.

First, the Commonwealth today, far from being a backward looking coterie of states, is proving (to the surprise of some) to be a living

network of relationships and like-minded values and principles that stretches across all continents – Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas – and across almost all religions, at a time when global reach is essential to tackle global problems. The great themes of democracy, human rights, good governance and the rule of law, the aspirations of all humankind, have found in the modern Commonwealth a fresh and resilient means of propagation in the network age.

Second, the Commonwealth, again to the surprise of some, is one of the fastest-developing associations of nations in the world – in some parts faster even than China – and contains at least seven of the most dynamic, knowledge-driven economies in the world. As the West's trade and investment tilts away from Europe and the Atlantic, and towards rising Asia and Africa, the Commonwealth network becomes more and more relevant for all its citizens in hard commercial terms, meaning jobs and investment in an age short of both.

Third, the Commonwealth survives and attracts new members when the world's other multilateral organisations, designed for the twentieth century, are failing us and in deep trouble. It provides scope for a real North–South dialogue on equal rather than patronising terms.

Fourth, in an age of small states, many of them feeling bypassed by global trends and tossed in the storms of world, the Commonwealth offers a life-raft of opportunity and influence, where smaller voices get a bigger hearing, and the problems of smaller states receive genuine attention and consideration, notably in meeting the severe challenges of climate change, energy scarcity, food and water needs, and other escape routes from poverty. It gives Britain yet another chance to recover its once strong reputation for helping the smaller and weaker states of the planet, to be a source of supportive partnership and not pressure, free of any suggestion of dominance, exploitation or control. At least potentially, the Commonwealth is thus emerging as the kind of forum in which richer and faster-growing countries and the poorer and smaller nations can speak on equal terms, in which people from different faiths can sit down and discuss their problems calmly (there are 500 million Muslims in the

Commonwealth), and in which almost all members are seriously committed – or under steady pressure to be committed – to good governance and to contributing to global peace and stability, rather than pursuing vendettas against America and ‘the West’.

Fifth, the Commonwealth, unlike most other multinational organisations and combinations of states in today’s world, is an assembly of peoples, not just of governments. Its most visible aspect may be heads of government gathering together, but beneath the official layer lies a vast substructure of alliances and groups, interests and professional bodies, civil societies and voluntary associations, all proudly carrying the Commonwealth badge.

There must be realism about the Commonwealth as it is developing today – at least at the official and governmental level. Within any family there are differences, even quarrels at times. That is inevitable. So it is in the Commonwealth family, where not all see eye to eye over either governance issues or world issues. Some are well off, some are not at all well off, and the gap may be widening. With new patterns and doctrines of international behaviour being aired and proclaimed all the Heads of government may clash – the aspect most of interest to the media, of course. But below the surface lies a real Commonwealth network, outside the range of governments and their media camp followers, which continues to knit together across the world as never before.

A second reality is that as the Commonwealth network evolves, not all agree as to how standards should be enforced. That there should be high standards in terms of fundamental values and principles of behaviour and governance, to which all members should aspire to adhere, is not in question. That is the distinctive nature of the club, that it requires certain standards to be matched. Not anyone can march through the entry door. But how those standards should be upheld, policed and even enforced is much more controversial. Responding to the times, the Commonwealth leaders have sought, and continue to seek, new methods for ensuring principles are upheld in member states. This is work in progress, work to ‘advance the

Commonwealth's values', as the most recent Report and Recommendations on strengthening the Commonwealth 'brand' put it.

It is work, moreover, that is yielding growing results. A new Charter of Commonwealth Values has now been agreed and validated. Cynics may say that this is not for the first time. There have, after all, been a string of declarations and manifestoes down the years, from the Harare Declaration of 1992 (irony of ironies, when one thinks what the Mugabe regime did for human rights there) to the Milbank Declaration of 1994, to the Auckland Charter of 1996. What is the difference this time? The difference is connectivity and information. This is a Charter – a Maxima Carta – that sets standards for an age of almost if not complete connectivity.

A constant debate within this new network is hardly surprising. Sixteen realms, under the Queen, and 37 (at the time of writing) republics and independent states are hardly likely to agree on everything. But the point is that if there are disputes they are not with 'foreigners', not lost in translation, but between members of the family, all viewing each other as closer than, and subtly different in feel and attitude from, foreign states. Heads of government may clash – the aspect most of interest to the media, of course. But below the surface lies a real Commonwealth network, outside the range of governments and their media camp followers, which continues to knit together across the world as never before.

But how those standards should be upheld, policed and even enforced is much more controversial. Responding to the times, the Commonwealth leaders have sought, and continue to seek, new methods for ensuring principles are upheld in member states. This is work in progress, work to 'advance the Commonwealth's values', as the most recent Report and Recommendations on strengthening the Commonwealth 'brand' put it. There are obvious backsliders – sometimes nations have simply failed to update legislation inherited from their colonial pasts many decades ago. Attitudes to gay rights and to capital punishment, long since altered in Britain, are examples of this time lag. But the Commonwealth genius is that it acts as the constant pressure source and channel for change. To be pressed

collectively from within the system is surely more likely to find a response than being lectured from afar by other nations claiming a moral superiority that they may not actually possess.

There is also the matter of new or would-be members of the Commonwealth family. The rigid requirement that membership demanded some previous association with the British Empire has long since been relaxed. Mozambique, Rwanda and Cameroon are now enthusiastic Commonwealth members. As Chapter 1 revealed, others are knocking at the door or seeking to associate themselves with some of the pillar organisations

There are other states where serious voices can be heard talking about membership but nothing is said by ministers or at government level. The most interesting country in this category is the Republic of Ireland.

The Queen's visit of May 2011 proved outstandingly successful in healing old wounds and promoting reconciliation. Bringing Ireland and the UK, as fellow members of the Commonwealth, alongside each other in that orbit ought to be an opportunity not just for reinforcing the institutional links. The Council of the Isles has long existed, although hardly in a state of public prominence. The new thought, yet to mature fully in either Dublin or London, is that Britain and Ireland need each other as never before. The combined voice of the whole British Isles would carry new weight both in a European and a wider international context.

The existence of a queue of interested applicants is itself a kind of message. It does not, of course, guarantee that they will be admitted. A careful balance has to be struck between the danger of dilution and the invigoration of new members entering the Commonwealth family. Either way, the fact that states and societies round the world are privately urging their governments to consider applying, or are actually sending representatives to Commonwealth events, says something. It says that the Commonwealth is today's club of preference, the group that countries ambitious for improvement feel

they should join. The precise status or category of new member states matters not at all. Queen Elizabeth is the ruler, the monarch, quite separately and independently of 16 Commonwealth countries, the so-called Realms. The rest are republics or separate kingdoms. New applicants for returning to Realm status seem unlikely, although in this modern turn-turtle world of contradictions and reversals, stranger things have happened. Fourteen other British Overseas Dependent Territories nestle in under British membership, but increasingly aspire to have a bigger role at the Commonwealth table.

In the end the Commonwealth will succeed or wither away as a multilateral forum, depending on its practical usefulness and the clear benefits it brings to its members, very much including Britain. Today the UN struggles to reform but remains at loggerheads over its own reform, over fundamental issues and facing severe internal problems to boot. Nothing could replace it, but something else seems to be needed in the twenty-first century. The various regional alliances and organisations are growing in power, but by definition lack the global spread the Commonwealth offers. The European Union is the biggest and potentially the most powerful regional bloc, but is beset by fearful current problems which hold it back and becalm its economic activity. The World Trade Organization (WTO) still struggles to avoid deadlock at Doha on farm subsidies, while those outside the existing trade blocs feel increasingly frustrated at their still substantially barred access to the richer markets. By contrast, the Commonwealth scene looks somewhat more positive. Intra-Commonwealth trade appears to be expanding steadily, as are investment flows between its countries. Much more work remains to be done in establishing the full picture of contemporary Commonwealth exchanges. None of this may amount to the case for anything like a Commonwealth Free Trade Area (an old idea attempted twice in the twentieth century, although in very different conditions). That era is past. But it does suggest a pause for thought as to how in today's very changed trading conditions, this extraordinary network, with a reach stretching right across regions and continents and embracing a third of the world's population, might (if it can be strengthened imaginatively) do a better job than the existing battered international institutions.

What the Commonwealth requires now is perhaps less intergovernmental grandeur and more practicality. What governments need to do, the British government included, is to study more closely, and then reinforce, the strong developments now taking place within the Commonwealth network. For example, as intra-Commonwealth business expands, and intra-Commonwealth cultural and professional ties multiply, the need for easier intra-Commonwealth travel increases. It ought to be possible to replicate something like the business travel card system operating between six members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group (APEC). Better information about the Commonwealth potential – not just its history but its beckoning future – needs to be embedded in the educational curriculum of member countries, Britain most definitely included. Scholarship and study opportunities in all directions need to be fostered and increased – not just one way towards the UK and not just at governmental level. All universities, British and Commonwealth, have a part to play in enlarging the volume of scholarship schemes. A Commonwealth Trade and Investment Bank has been proposed by Indian advocates to boost Commonwealth trade and investment potential. Numerous new Commonwealth initiatives are springing up of their own accord, unheralded and unnoticed by officialdom, such as the Commonwealth Environmental Investment Platform, bringing entrepreneurs throughout the Commonwealth together. For Britain specifically, in addition to external opportunities and benefits, there are internal gains to be harvested. No one has a precise estimate of the numbers of British citizens of Commonwealth origin or with close Commonwealth connections. But the guess is that this ‘Commonwealth within’ is very large. A Britain with a more clearly articulated Commonwealth role could be a friendlier and more unifying place for millions who are uncertain where their loyalties lie or with what causes they should identify. When disunity is tugging at every edge of British nationhood, the Commonwealth story could pull powerfully the other way, whether against Scottish separatism, alienated cultural and ethnic groups, or rootless younger generations.

The Commonwealth template stretches over this new scene, bringing a clear and calming prospect of betterment and common purpose. Its roots are old, stretching back into the histories of its original members, but its character today is youthful – in the most literal sense. Half the 2 billion or more citizens of the Commonwealth are under 25. For women, its declared aim is a far better future and a much better gender balance generally.

Over it all presides Queen Elizabeth II, as she has done for 60 years past – an undeniably unifying influence, held in high affection and leading the way to the future with vast experience and skill. The paradoxes are powerful – a monarch guiding the way to a new world order! Succession to the role of head of the Commonwealth is not automatic. When the time comes, the Commonwealth membership will want the right to choose. But there is every reason to suppose that the choice will continue to fall on the occupant of the British throne. As a bloc, the Commonwealth is historically one of the most successful collections of nations in world history. But of course it is not a bloc in the conventional sense. Its links are electronic, not geographical; they are digitally networked, not hierarchical; they are between peoples and societies and the modules within each social structure. The challenge from the back of the hall, or from the journalists in the front row – who is in charge? – cannot really be answered in the usual terms. The nearest answer would be that the people are in charge, or perhaps it is nearer the mark to say the network is in charge. The Commonwealth is a creation of self-assembly. It is not the United Nations, nor even a pale replica of it. And it is not a regional bloc like the battered European Union. It is an escape from these structures and it leads to territory that these organisations do not reach, and often cannot see. This is its power and its weakness. It is a truly vibrant global family of cultures, economies, societies and political groups, far from perfect but looking in the same positive direction.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is where Britain and its people should now look too.

David Howell, 25th November 2013