

Transcript

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The Role and Future of the Commonwealth

An Australian Viewpoint

I am delighted to be here today as perhaps for the first time this year I can come to an event without having to comment on the demise of Australia's sporting prowess. Having had a dreadful mid year it really is very nice to have at least won the first test, the Rugby League World Cup and the recent Union test against Wales.

My High Commissioner, his Excellency Mike Rann, sends his sincere apologies for not being able to make it here today but I am not sure whether to curse or thank him for this honour. Curse because he really is quite expert on the Commonwealth and I am not, but also thank because it is great to be back in this beautiful city. Having also seen that Lord Howell of Guildford gave a most erudite presentation at your last meeting did make it all the more daunting. None the less am at the crease and I shall give it my best shot.

I was given a few potential topics to talk about and I have settled on the future and role of the Commonwealth from an Australian viewpoint. Given it is not my field of expertise I have to admit to collecting the thoughts of Australia's leaders, past and present and hopefully they will present a coherent case.

Our New Prime Minister addressed the opening ceremony at the recent CHOGM meeting in Colombo and his opening words frame Australia's position on the Commonwealth. He said:

"The Commonwealth spans 54 countries with 30 per cent of the world's population, 20 per cent of the world's land mass but just 15 per cent of the world's GDP.

The Commonwealth is not a community of power, wealth, geography, religion or language, so much as a community of values.

We believe in democracy based on the rule of law.

We acknowledge Queen Elizabeth as head of the Commonwealth.

We share a legacy of British institutions and influence which all of us have adapted and improved in our own ways.

We are convinced that you don't make new friends by losing old ones. We remain members of the Commonwealth because we believe that this dialogue helps us to come closer to being our best selves.”

He went on to reinforce that the Commonwealth exists to pursue issues of collective interest and to improve the lot of the peoples of the Commonwealth. Issues such as food security, sustainable development, and health are regular agenda features but so is the sensitive subject of human rights which we have a collective obligation to pursue and to hold our members accountable when their standards are perhaps not what they should be.

Australia has recently completed its two years as chair and I think the meeting we held in Perth was instructive of the view we take on the Commonwealth. That CHOGM meeting was entitled "Building National Resilience, Building Global Resilience" and highlighted how strengthening member countries' economic, social and political resilience would support global economic recovery and stability. It was linked with a range of arts, culture and supporting events which allowed the commonwealth to showcase its unity and diversity at the same time.

From an Australian perspective it is perhaps challenging to understand our view on the Commonwealth until you understand how our location in the world shapes our thinking.

The meeting was held in Perth for good reason. As our western capital, Perth is our gateway to the Indian Ocean. Holding CHOGM in Perth demonstrated to the world, that Australia is both a country of the Indian Ocean and a country of the Pacific. We are a two ocean nation — not one.

Perth also sent a message of the growing importance of the Indian Ocean region, the great opportunities provided by the rise of India, the significant markets of the Gulf States and the emergence of Africa.

Australia's Commonwealth interests are very much a subset of our National Interests. These are to maintain national security; to enhance our national economic growth; to maintain and strengthen the global and regional order (political, strategic, economic, environmental and humanitarian) through what we describe as good international citizenship; and finally, to support the interests of the more than one million Australians who are abroad at any one time. In this sense our interests do not vary much from any other developed country but they are shaped intensively by our geography.

Our global interests mean Australia needs to be active in all regions in the world through what we call creative, middle power diplomacy.

But we are also a middle power with deep regional interests as well.

We look across the Pacific, to our enduring ally, the United States and the rising economies of Latin America, led by Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Chile.

We look north to the new locus of global economic and strategic power in North East Asia and Southeast Asia. The enormous economies of China, Japan and South Korea and expanding economies like Indonesia.

Australia also looks west to the Indian Ocean, which presents us with a vast array of challenges and opportunities for the future.

So what are our long term interests in this vast region?

The Indian Ocean region is home to almost 40 per cent of the world's population. Within its boundaries, the Indian Ocean region comprises South Asia, the Gulf States and Africa.

South Asia is undergoing an extraordinary economic growth, led by the rising power of India. India is tipped at some point within the next 15 years to overtake China as the world's most populous nation. While it has slowed recently there are those that predict that its economic growth will outpace China's within the decade.

As the Indian economy continues to grow, India's regional and global role will grow. This is a natural extension of not only its growing strength but also of its growing confidence as a regional and global player. The Indian Ocean also of course laps the shores of the great continent of Africa. The twenty-first century looms as a significant century, not just for Asia, but also for Africa.

Africa has nearly a billion people — 500 million of these are working age. Over the past decade sub-Saharan Africa's real GDP growth rate jumped to an annual average of 5.7 per cent, up from 2.4 per cent over the previous two decades.

The continent's economic impressive growth is testament to the determination by Africans to turn their continent around. More open political systems, more peaceful conclusions to longstanding conflicts and a greater openness to foreign investment have made for an impressive economic turnaround. Although there remain examples of destructive behaviour which will continue to slow broader development because of the confidence destroying nature of these actions, the overall trend remains positive.

Africa contains 30 per cent of the world's mineral reserves but only five per cent of the global mineral extraction budget is allocated to African projects. This means much of the African story is yet to be told and within that story there is opportunity for Australia.

Australia has ramped up its engagement with Africa. More than 220 Australian resource companies have assets in Africa — 200 of these are involved in mining. Perth is home to the vast majority of the Australian listed resource companies working in Africa. They account for 600 individual projects, spread over 42 countries. They account for \$20 billion worth of actual and perspective investment.

Supporting this investment is core to Australia's national economic interests. Australia now has diplomatic relations with all of the 53 African countries, compared with only 41 back in 2007. We have strengthened our presence on the ground, opening a new mission in Addis Ababa — the home of the African Union — and boosting the number of Australian staff at our posts in Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Egypt. Austrade has also opened offices in Accra and Nairobi, staffed by local business development managers whose primary focus is on mining.

For all the opportunities in Africa, we cannot ignore the pressing human development needs of the continent. It remains the poorest continent in the world. Approximately half a billion Africans live in what we would call extreme poverty and this is why Australia has a significant aid program in Africa.

Looking more closely the countries of the Indian Ocean region are our neighbours, they are our markets, and many of them are also our security partners. The truth is the Indian Ocean region at present exists with little concrete sense of pan-regional identity, of the type we find in the Asia Pacific. But this was also the reality in the Asia Pacific a generation or so ago.

In co-operation with India and other members, Australia wants to try to develop over time a common set of interests, values and norms that might guide our future engagement across this region. We are doing so incrementally, taking small, practical steps towards greater regional co-operation — co-operation in functional areas which will deliver real advantages to regional countries.

The alternative is to allow the Indian Ocean region simply to drift, with competing interests in the region over time potentially spawning instability and even conflict. As Australia looks west to Africa, South Asia and beyond, the Commonwealth as an institution enhances our interests in the wider region.

Half of the 54 Commonwealth countries lie to Australia's west.

18 of Africa's 54 countries are Commonwealth members, including South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania.

So too are other countries of the Indian Ocean: India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

So too are Malaysia and Singapore which, like Australia, face both the Indian and Pacific oceans and play a critical role in the security of the sea lines of communication between both oceans.

So too are many of the small island states of the Indian Ocean.

So the Commonwealth has particular relevance to our broader national policy of looking west. The Commonwealth of course has a wider relevance to Australian national interests as well. The paradox of the 21st Century is that global power is more diffuse than before. But the challenges we confront are more global than ever before.

Australia will therefore need stronger cooperation among state actors from across the world when tackling some of the great global challenges we face. Some criticise the Commonwealth as being an outdated remnant of a distant colonial past but this is a perhaps an outdated view. Let us reflect for a moment on some basic statistical realities which I briefly mentioned earlier.

The Commonwealth represents one third of the world's population.

More than one quarter of the total membership of the United Nations.

The Commonwealth spans all six continents — our membership encompasses Asia-Pacific, the Americas, Europe, South Asia and Africa — regions to which global economic and strategic influence is shifting.

The Commonwealth's membership contains five members of the G20, one third of the membership of the East Asia Summit, one quarter of the membership of APEC, more than one third of the membership of the African Union, three members of the European Union, the majority membership of the Pacific Islands Forum and the Caribbean Community, as well as members of the Organisation of American States, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Organisation internationale de la francophonie (International Organisation of the Francophone).

Over 40 of the G77 countries are members of the Commonwealth. More than half are members of the Non Aligned Movement. The Commonwealth encompasses the major faiths in the world — Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist.

The Commonwealth's 54 members comprise some of the world's least and most populous countries: from Tuvalu with only 11 000 people to India with its 1.2 billion people.

The Commonwealth covers over 20 per cent of the world's total land area, again including some of the smallest and largest countries by size: from the tiny nation state of Nauru at just 22 square kilometres to Canada which is almost 10 million square kilometres.

One third of the Commonwealth's 2 billion people live on one dollar a day. Over half of the Commonwealth's population is under 25.

It is of significant benefit for Australia to be a member of such a broad organisation with such extensive representation in the principal regional organisations of the world.

This provides us with constructive points of contact across the world.

As well as providing us access to an institution that reflects the full gamut of developed and developing country perspectives, on the great global challenges we face today.

The Commonwealth also provides a unique platform for small and vulnerable states who might otherwise struggle to have their views heard and acknowledged.

Around half the members of the Commonwealth are considered small states and Australia recognises the strong and important voice that Commonwealth membership gives to these potentially vulnerable states.

I have today spoken of the Commonwealth's role in enhancing our engagement with the vast Indian Ocean region to our west.

I have also spoken about the global "weight" of the Commonwealth's 54 strong membership — and the significant roles that the member countries play across a vast range of global and regional institutions.

I have also spoken about the capacity of the Commonwealth given its vast and diverse membership to harness political momentum behind the great global policy issues of the day, whatever they might be.

And I have spoken too about the Commonwealth as relevant to giving expression to the interests of the smallest and most vulnerable states in the world.

Finally, I would like to highlight the capacity of the Commonwealth to foster both global business and Australian business — given the commonality of language, the commonality of common law traditions, and the commonality of democratic values for forging business contacts in some of the biggest economies in the world — both developed economies and the biggest emerging economies as well.

The Commonwealth's total value of imports in 2009 was estimated at almost US\$2 trillion dollars — 15 per cent of world imports.

Our total value of exports was around US\$1.7 trillion.

The Commonwealth's combined GDP accounts for US\$7.2 trillion or about 12.6 per cent of world GDP.

GDP growth over the last ten years for Commonwealth countries grew by an average of 9.5 per cent per year.

This was faster than the 7.6 per cent growth per year recorded by non-Commonwealth countries.

It was faster than world GDP growth, which increased by 7.8% per year over the last 10 years.

As the World Bank stated in 2010, developing countries will account for 50 per cent of global growth and surpass the economic dominance of developed nations by 2015.

The Commonwealth Business Council continues to promote trade and investment and to increase the role of the private sector. In short the commonwealth counts to the economy.

I noted earlier the CHOGM held in Perth and from an Australian perspective our biggest achievement out of that meeting and from our time as chair was the development the Charter of the Commonwealth which for the first time captured, in a single document the spirit of the Commonwealth and which was given the assent of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second.

Since then Australia has actively pursued and won a seat on the UN Security Council, providing the commonwealth with an additional voice at that table. Notably in our time as chair our first issue we had charge of was dealing with Syrian chemical weapons. Next year we take the chair of the G20 and similarly provide a voice that is informed by the Charter that we collectively developed.

In this sense, the UK voice, complemented by Australia presently, ensures the commonwealth is in someway represented at that most important of venues.

Finally as a soldier it would be remiss of me not to make a few short comments from a military perspective. The Commonwealth is unique in that through models developed initially in the UK the militaries of its nations are linked through a largely common and shared history. Our ethos and values were born here but quite rightly have evolved as our nations have evolved and yet they remain incredibly unifying. This said we share an easy familiarity. We speak a common language and wherever we are drawn together we find that bonding with commonwealth allies is more often than not the least of the challenges we face.

It is clear that as we draw to the centenary of the First World War that there is much that we have done together to shape the world we live in but more importantly we continue to be drawn together for what we see as the common good, whether that be at war in Afghanistan, in peacekeeping in Timor Leste or in doing typhoon relief in the Philippines. That we know each other, that we understand each other, that we respect each other makes a difference. We do not know what will come next but is in part through the existence of the Commonwealth that our ability to respond will be made easier.

To conclude, I'd like to draw upon the thoughts of a former foreign minister, Kevin Rudd and highlight the role of the Commonwealth as an important custodian of the global values of democracy, good governance and the rule of law.

These values, and the institutions which uphold them, are deeply grounded in our countries.

History links us to the Magna Carta. History links us to the world's first parliamentary democracy. History also links us to the great heroes of the democracy of the 20th century as well — we think of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

These are strong foundations but they must be built upon to ensure the Commonwealth remains both contemporary and relevant. Democracy and political freedom are universal rights not bound to specific cultures or specific times. The Commonwealth's core values of democracy, human rights, good governance and the rule of law are universal.

The wave of change that swept over the Middle East and North Africa reminded us of this and the recent subsequent challenges inform us that these changes are fragile and dynamic.

Why does this matter to the Commonwealth?

It is crucial that the Commonwealth continues to speak with a confident, universal voice when democracy is under threat around the world.

The Commonwealth has in the past acted to uphold these values. It has brokered peace agreements among African countries. The Commonwealth worked to end Apartheid. It has sent around 80 electoral observation teams to Commonwealth countries since 1990.

Universally the Commonwealth needs to build on this proud democratic tradition and to strengthen it. Each state will express its view differently but the collective view should be sustained when one of our states fails to meet our standards.

I began by outlining Australia's global and regional interests.

I described Australia as a middle power.

I highlighted the importance to Australia of creative middle power diplomacy in advancing our national interests and our national values.

The Commonwealth as an institution assists in the realisation of Australia's interests. Our security interests, our economic interests, and our commitment to good international citizenship in the building of a sustainable global and regional rules-based order.

Of course, we also need to be realistic in our approach to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth is not an alliance. The Commonwealth is not a trade bloc, nor is it a negotiating bloc. Rather, it is a broad network of nations whose membership reflects the different realities of the modern world, nonetheless united by common democratic values.

In the increasingly fractured global order of the 21st century, this is no small thing.

Such a network matters. If we started from scratch, such a network could simply not be replicated, nor could it be designed. As such, the Commonwealth is overwhelmingly a force for the global good.

And this force for good should be harnessed for the future — constructively applied to the many challenges before us.

We in the Commonwealth share a similar history. But we also reflect the modern world. We speak a common language. We have familiar institutions. We share deep, common bonds, including that great contemplative game called cricket.

Our continuing challenge and opportunity is to deploy these formidable strengths, not easily replicated elsewhere across the world, to meet the great challenges of our time.