

24.11.05_ Article for The Financial Times on the Commonwealth re the 1995 FAC report

Ten years ago the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee issued an optimistic Report on the Commonwealth.

High hopes were expressed. In its conclusions the Report asserted that far from being a relic of the past the Commonwealth was evolving as the kind of network institution which suited the age of the information revolution. It went on to recommend a whole series of steps to strengthen both trade and investment ties between Commonwealth countries, and generally to put the Commonwealth more at the centre of British foreign policy.

Have these hopes been realised in the succeeding decade? Have they raised the profile of the Commonwealth as a significant global institution? And will they be reflected in the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, (due in Malta in a few days time), or in the Commonwealth Business Forum which immediately precedes it?

The realistic but gloomy answer to these questions must be 'No'. Many worthy and worthwhile declarations on the world's problems will no doubt emerge from Malta, and it is true that these bi-annual CHOGMS are friendly and, so many participants say, enjoyable occasions, quite unlike some other Summits one can think of.

But for the wider public, and the media who inform it, the Commonwealth remains at best a mildly useful talking shop and at worst a mere relic of past glories, supposedly binding its 53 member states together with common commitment to the rule of law and democratic values, but in practice marred by ugly rows over the distinctly undemocratic Zimbabwe – which has now walked out anyway – and the less than perfect behaviour of one or two other member states.

Yet perhaps we are being blinded by these long established perceptions from seeing the Commonwealth institution in a rather different light. It could just be that with many of the world's twentieth century institutions performing so disappointingly a gap in the global institutional architecture has opened up which the Commonwealth model, if its leaders were ready to adapt it, could effectively fill.

The thought rests on both negative and positive global trends. On the negative side we have the UN with its members at loggerheads over fundamental issues and with severe internal problems to boot. We have the EU apparently 'stalled', or at least becalmed, with sharply divided views amongst its members on trade, on security and on world affairs. We have the WTO trying to avoid deadlock at Doha on farm subsidies, and those outside the existing trade blocs feeling increasingly frustrated at their still substantially barred access to the richer markets.

Turn to the Commonwealth and the scene looks far more positive. Intra-Commonwealth trade appears to be expanding, as are investment flows, and this is hardly surprising. The Commonwealth now includes six of the cutting edge countries, aside from the US, in information technology, e-commerce and the growth of the knowledge industries – India, Australia, UK, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia. Shared legal procedures, lack of language barriers (there are no interpreters at Commonwealth gatherings) and many common business 'habits' make life easier for direct investment flows between members.

More than that the Commonwealth offers – at least potentially – the kind of forum in which richer and faster growing countries and the poorer and smaller nations can speak on equal terms, in which the faithful 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 to contributing to global peace and stability, rather than pursuing vendettas against America and the 'the West'.

None of this may amount – at least yet – to the case for a Commonwealth Free Trade Area

(an old idea tried attempted twice in the twentieth century ,although in very different conditions). But it does suggest a pause for thought as to how this extraordinary network, with a reach stretching right across regions and continents, might, if it were strengthened imaginatively, do a better job than the existing battered international institutions in both opening up the world economy and uniting the more well-intentioned and responsible countries in facing up to the ugly dangers of terrorism, pariah nations, entrenched and paralysing poverty, corruption and rotten governance – to name a few.

Although countries continue to queue up to join the Commonwealth – which must say something for it – the question is whether in its present form it could ever carry enough clout to have a decisive impact on world trends and events.

A possible way forward might be to offer a much closer association, of not actual membership, to some other important countries who are outside the existing blocs or uncomfortable within them.

The obvious candidate here is Japan – a nation which is at last returning to what it terms ‘normal country status’ – which means ,after decades of pacifism, a readiness to contribute to global peace and stability in a more decisive way and on a scale commensurate with its economic weight – which happens to be colossal.

A closely allied grouping which contained Japan, India, Australasia and the UK, for a start, would indeed be a common force of both wealth and power, entitled to a full hearing from the American giant and able to stand up for common values of justice and democracy in a way that no other international institution can currently do.

This would be a Commonwealth Mark Two which fitted neatly and constructively into the global conditions of the twenty first century. It is worth working for.