

Lord Howell opens Lords Debate on Commonwealth Trade

08.07.21

Motion to Take Note

1.54pm

Moved by

Lord Howell of Guildford

That this House takes note of the progress made in renewing the United Kingdom's trading relationship with Commonwealth countries.

Lord Howell of Guildford
(Con)

My Lords, I declare my interests, past and present, on Commonwealth matters as in the register: I am a former Minister for the Commonwealth and former president of the Royal Commonwealth Society.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to discuss Commonwealth developments with your Lordships. Now that we are told that the Commonwealth has moved to the centre of UK trade plans, it is clearly obvious that we should focus hard on these issues. I also welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Chapman, to the Opposition Front Bench, as I understand it is her first appearance in this role. It will not be a joy-ride of course, but she will certainly find it different from her very high-profile roles in the other place and her prominent position in her party. We wish her well.

It is impossible to comprehend the Commonwealth today, or its future direction and prospects, without understanding how it has evolved and is still evolving as a result of the worldwide communications revolution and its fundamental impact on all global networks, of which the Commonwealth happens to be the largest. Whether we are looking at public or private network systems or those that operate between the two spheres, the incredible potency of instant and continuous communication and exchange has changed the way that nations relate on all issues, the way that groups and interests relate and, indeed, the way that people relate.

The plain and obvious fact of existence now is that technology has enormously empowered network structures of all kinds as against traditional hierarchies of governance, with their inevitable centralising traits. The tendency of Commonwealth critics today—of whom there are a few, including not a few academics who dismiss the Commonwealth—springs from what these learned folk think they see through the lens of officialdom and government, as well as the lens of the past. To take a recent example, the modern Commonwealth was recently called

“an irrelevant institution afflicted by imperialist amnesia”,

by someone who, frankly, should have known much better.

However, in the age of networking and digital connectivity, the binding ties of a voluntary, non-treaty, global organisation such as the Commonwealth are sealed as much by enterprise and trade, civil society concerns and common everyday life and work interests as through government channels—indeed, even more so. This is of course what gives the Commonwealth today its vibrancy and brings it alive as never before.

The Library briefing for this debate is a bit wrong in this respect when it says that three intergovernmental organisations are at the core of the Commonwealth association. It is not so; in fact, it is the nexus of non-governmental organisations, professions, business interests, education at all levels, science, law and hundreds of informal links, not to mention sports connections and the enormous and expanding range of arts and cultural links of every kind, that are increasingly at the core of the Commonwealth. They are all areas where, nowadays, soft power is at its most telling and effective.

Networks never sleep. The future pattern of international relations will be—and is already—far more through interest groups, professions, twinning of cities and dialogue between them, business conferences and initiatives, universities, research and discovery, shared technology and innovation, and a thousand other connections than through any formal governmental or official channels or agreements. It is precisely this quality which makes the Commonwealth, in Her Majesty the Queen’s own words,

“in many ways the face of the future”,

and why some more far-seeing commentators cite it as a model for international co-operation on issues large and small in the world we are moving into. This is a pattern of fluidity and resilience that no old-style hierarchies or alliances, burdened with their heavy furniture of top tables, pecking orders and costly central secretariats, can ever match.

The detailed, unfolding Commonwealth trade and investment prospect will, I am sure, be explained later in this debate by my noble friend Lord Marland, who chairs so ably the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council and deals with some of the world’s largest and fastest-growing consumer markets, especially in Asia, which the Commonwealth now embraces.

I should say a word to your Lordships about the Brexit effect on Commonwealth economies, about which there were initially some fears. Most, if not all of these, were addressed fairly thoroughly in the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement and most countries that have partnership agreements with the EU have been covered by free trade agreements with the United Kingdom—or at least bridged by the generalised scheme of preferences.

Meanwhile, the immensely effective work of the noble Lord, Lord Grimstone—we call him our own—and the International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss, is opening up deals and opportunities with Australia, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa, Ghana and a dozen other countries, and we hope, in due course, with the giant of all, India, although frankly that will not be easy.

There is also the African Continental Free Trade Area, which will create the largest single free trade area in the world and is heavily Commonwealth-weighted.

Then there is our application to join the rather clumsily named Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Half its membership just happens to be from Commonwealth countries and it opens access to massive new markets for us, including the world’s biggest markets—as long as we meet the common rules and standard required, of course.

We also have to remember that there is a leading Commonwealth figure—the wonderful Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala—at the helm of the World Trade Organization, so we are very well placed in this system.

The Zoom experience, which has mushroomed in the past year of the pandemic tragedy, has greatly increased the value of the key characteristics of the Commonwealth system and opened doors to multiple new initiatives. The new technology now swiftly gathers into one “room” hundreds of participants from across the planet where a mere handful could be assembled before. Of course, the cost of travel and accommodation in coming together are no longer the constraint that they were.

This means that bodies such as the Commonwealth of Learning, based in Vancouver—already one of the largest distance-learning organisations in the world—can have continuous meetings and contacts with new levels of frequency. It means that, through bodies such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities, scholarly exchange, tutorship, and discussion on trade can be lifted from the cold text to friendly conversation in an instant. It means that business conferences and seminars can be organised on a global scale with new speed and ease. It means that intimate co-operation on areas far outside trade and culture—such as energy, properly tailored climate assistance, security, defence and intelligence—can be, and is being, built up like never before.

With the English language as the protocol of the planet, and with the soft power of influence and persuasion being the prime currency of international exchange, these new

worldwide conditions fit the open hand of the Commonwealth system like the proverbial glove.

Frankly. I think it is the professors and the regular Commonwealth decriers, as well as some of our dismissive foreign policy and trade gurus, who are the real amnesia sufferers. They stare into the past and forget to study how the world has radically changed, how the Commonwealth has grown and changed totally since its 1949 inception, and how new forces of cohesion and co-operation are now at work within the world wide web that embraces us all.

I should add that, while we are rightly talking about trade, business growth, prosperity and poverty escape, we must remember that trade depends absolutely on peace and security. Here, too, the Commonwealth's significance is growing, both in conventional forms through joint naval co-operation and in the new defence and security areas of cyber defence, intelligence, unmanned weaponry, aerial and marine, artificial intelligence and, of course, co-operation on terrorism prevention in all forms.

An effective and common front in containing China in Asia is going to depend on Commonwealth-dominated organisations such as Five Eyes, which need to be kept in tip-top condition, and on close defence co-operation at all levels with Commonwealth members. The new move to counter China's belt and road initiative as it advances across the world is by the so-called Blue Dot Network initiative, combining public and private investment projects. That also depends heavily on commitment from Commonwealth countries and on Japan, a nation that has always taken a shrewd and close interest in the networking potential of Commonwealth—rather more than interest than has sometimes been shown right here in the UK.

World markets are changing fast, both geographically and in their nature, as services and technology transform trade flows. Distance matters less and less. All the modelling now suggests substantial scope for increased intra-Commonwealth trade. For one thing, we can obviously offer in this country a trade regime that is less heavy than the European Union pattern, although we need to keep close, good and sensible relations with the EU. Straightaway, we can be less protectionist where some industries and interests, which the EU strongly protects, are ones that we simply do not have and do not need to protect. Someone pointed out the other day that we do not need to check every lemon that comes into the United Kingdom because we do not grow lemons, as far as I know. That is just one small example of a different approach we can take.

My overall conclusion is the same as the one that the noble Lord, Lord Purvis, reached three years ago in the excellent inquiry by the All-Party Group on Trade Out of Poverty, which he chaired; I think we shall hear from him towards the end of this debate. We need a new mandate from Commonwealth leaders for trade and investment developments of all kinds, and that mandate is needed not to pave the way but to catch up with the amazing developments occurring at great speed. They open our own access to the

expansion of vast new consumer markets where all the growth is going to be in the next 20 years, and address the needs of small and vulnerable states as well.

How good it would be to see this as a major legacy from the United Kingdom. We are just completing three years in office at the Commonwealth. It is all coming to an end. If we could bequeath this legacy and define it, how much this would also help to define our own national role and purpose at a time when old avenues have closed and a new era has begun. I beg to move.

2.07pm

4.01pm

Lord Howell of Guildford

(Con)

My Lords, I thank everyone in the Chamber and our electronically connected friends for all their excellent speeches. Indeed, I thank the Minister for his excellent survey of the Government's position and his round up of the debate. All of the speeches have been reminders that there is much more to trade and commerce than just trade itself. Without the wider conditions, there is no trade, nothing occurs, and prosperity disappears.

There is the health and vaccine issue. The noble Baroness, Lady Chapman, was right to draw our attention to that, as did my noble friend Lady Hooper. The secretariat played a strong role in that, led by the secretary-general, Patricia Scotland, which I think has borne fruit, even with India's colossal difficulties. There is also respect for human rights, which the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans reminded us about. There is the temptation or desire for others to join the Commonwealth, as my noble friend Lord Risby and the noble Lord, Lord Triesman, said. That point seemed to be more eloquent than any speech: if people want to join something, it must be good.

There is the climate threat, which my noble friend Lord Lansley referred to, and the need to help the smaller island nations, particularly by adaptation. I think we all understand totally the point made by the noble Lord, Lord Wigley, about fine Welsh lamb—how could we not? The basic point is that tastes, products and markets are changing. As my noble friend Lord Marland reminded us, there are completely new markets and new tastes, and new trade flows growing everywhere. My noble friend Lord Balfe reminded us that a lot of New Zealand and Australian products are going to the Middle East.

The message of all this is that we cannot stop where we are. We cannot go back; we have to go forward, and so does the Commonwealth, and so it is now going.

Motion agreed.

