

Speech by Lord Howell: House of Lords May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023 4.28pm

***Bringing the modern Commonwealth network far nearer the centre of UK foreign policy and strategy***

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(Con)

My Lords, I feel privileged to speak in the concluding stages of this excellent debate. I am lucky to be here at all, because by some quirk or hiccup I got left off the speakers' list—it was probably my fault. I congratulate the right reverend Prelate on his skill in securing this debate and on the excellent way in which he set the scene at the start. I did not agree with all of it, but it was a splendid survey.

I have a simple message to add to the wisdom we have heard this afternoon. The growing 56-nation Commonwealth of Nations, which is the largest network of its kind in the world, with more nations applying all the time and expressing interest from remarkable quarters, should be far more central to UK foreign policy, strategy and priorities than it is today.

I call attention to an article by the excellent Sir Trevor Phillips in the *Times*, on Saturday, I think, in which he set out with amazing clarity and sense the pan-global importance of today's growing Commonwealth—what the late Queen called “an entirely new conception”. Some of us have been trying for almost three decades to get this message deep into the minds of our foreign policy experts and strategists—so far, I must admit, with very limited success. I should also give a backhanded thank you to the Chinese themselves, who now remind us clearly and almost daily of the dangers to the whole Commonwealth network and to our own security, something people overlook, as they seek to entice numerous new member states—the smaller islands and coastal nations, particularly in Africa, are vulnerable — into their hegemony and the authoritarian control system. One very respected China expert recently called it hoovering up the developing nations, because that is what is going on.

A strong and focused reorientation of both our development and defence policy and our broader international priorities is required to counter this new reality in all its dimensions, which are not just military or aid but to do with a thousand other areas in this cyber and internet world. That applies to both the Chinese and the Russians. I noticed that the esteemed diplomatic editor of the *Times* wrote persuasively the other day on exactly this issue, as have an increasing number of distinguished media columnists, which gives one some hope.

I understand the difficulty for professional diplomats of grasping the rather elusive concept of the Commonwealth network. It is not a trade bloc; it is not under a treaty; large parts of it are non-governmental; it is, in fact, more and more a product of the modern age— a network, with its own internal dynamic. I also understand, in the light of our debate, that this is also occasionally difficult for the Church to grasp. This is delicate ground, but I was fascinated by an adage I picked up from de Tocqueville. He said that only by distancing themselves from politics do Churches and faiths preserve their power over men and women's selves—food for thought, I think.

Aside from that, and whether you agree with it or not, we are now moving into an entirely different world where like-minded medium-sized nations need to stick and work together as never before. My noble friend Lord Frost mentioned our likely membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. It has 12 members. When we join, it will have 13. Eight of those are Commonwealth members. You may say, "We don't all agree with each other and there are arguments around the table", but there is such a thing as coffee-break diplomacy and, in a few trade organisations I have been in, that has been very important. It is after the formal sessions when agreements can often be struck that shape an entirely new direction and reinforce our interests.

Most nations, particularly the younger Commonwealth nations, want their own independence. There is a silly argument that the media does not quite understand about whether being a realm or not means leaving the Commonwealth—of course, it does not; that is quite a different thing. Our new King remains Head of the Commonwealth and head, if not directly, of the majority of republics, kingdoms, sultanates and others of which the Commonwealth is composed. One day we will get that straight in the media's mind.

Those countries want their own independence. First, they are not automatically on our side, as we found when our foreign officials went round the Commonwealth to check they were all with us over Ukraine and found that half of them were not. Secondly, they are beginning to look at something like the Commonwealth, or the Commonwealth itself, as a potential safe haven from the enormous forces: the hegemonic grab of China, intruding at every point around the entire systems, as I have already indicated; overinfluence and being overbossed by the United States; and the undiluted ideology that belongs to a previous age, which does not really fit all their conditions as they would wish.

Questions hang in the air about Britain. Are we up to this role? Do we understand that there are entirely new forces operating in international

relations? Do we understand that our relationship with the United States—which, again, my noble friend Lord Frost and others have mentioned—needs to be examined quite carefully? The Americans are our good friends and our partners, but they are not the bosses. They are not the ones with whom we are the automatic and submissive satrapies. Our relationship with them should be healthy, and, like the independent countries of the Commonwealth, we wish to use and work on all the values that America can contribute.

Indeed, many countries work both ways. They take gold from China, they sometimes take—and regret it; there is quite a pushback going on—too much intervention from China, and too many dubious contributions and money, which they think is grants but it turns out to be loans, which they cannot pay back. These countries need constant support and help, and that is possible in the electronic age. Every day—not occasionally—friends have to be worked on, and can be, and that is what the British Government should be doing. I repeat the questions. Are we up for that role? Do we have the right relationship with the United States? Can we clarify and get a balanced approach to the enormous looming hegemony of China, with all the difficulties that have been mentioned by several speakers? I do not know the answer to these questions but they are the ones we have to work on. Perhaps the Minister will help us a little. They are very difficult but central to our future prosperity and our security in our new place in a new and very dangerous world.

4.37pm