

# Evolving Commonwealth and UK Strategy

Lord Howell opens Lords Debate and calls for Commonwealth Network to be at the centre of UK policy and security - 30.06.22

2.53pm

Moved by

Lord Howell of Guildford

That this House takes note of the 2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and the future of the Commonwealth.

Lord Howell of Guildford

(Con)

‘My Lords, I declare a general interest and involvement in this subject over many years, although nothing specific in the register. My purpose in seeking this debate is not merely to reflect on the just finished Heads of

Government meeting in Kigali in Rwanda but to share some thoughts on how the Commonwealth network fits into the entirely new contours of the international landscape that we now confront and into our own future

prosperity, security and influence. Kigali seemed to go extremely well. Personally, I welcome the outcome that

the change of Secretary-General will be orderly and in two years’ time. This prevents further division and gives a chance to the current Secretary- General, the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Scotland, to overcome her

past difficulties and help lift the evolving Commonwealth to its new level of significance in both economic and security world affairs. A good deal of quiet work has been going on at the secretariat, especially in the causes of women and girls in the changing Commonwealth, in environmental and marine co-operation and in the struggling smaller island states. However, people now look to Marlborough House to give an altogether stronger lead to the network, especially in the face of the new security threats its members confront, to which I will come a little later.

I also salute the work of my noble friend Lord Marland, who I see is here and I hope will speak, whose business forum meeting in Kigali showed how he has injected fresh vigour into expanding Commonwealth trade and

investment. The opportunity is certainly there for that when the Commonwealth today contains several of the fastest-growing and highest- tech economies in the world, as well as many of the poorest, which are most threatened by current events, such as the pandemic, energy costs and increased climate violence.

However, I want to come to the future and how the Commonwealth fits into it. I can do that best by asking some basic questions. First, what is the Commonwealth’s purpose today? I begin to answer this by repeating what the Commonwealth is not: it is not a block, an alliance, a treaty-bound organisation, a relic, or a nostalgic leftover of Empire. Indeed, it is an entirely different network today not just from the imperial past but from the eight-member Commonwealth of Nations set up in the 1949 London declaration. It now has 54 members and is about to increase with two more; several other countries indicate a desire to join. That is hardly a sign of a declining system or a fading association, as ill-informed critics like to keep claiming. Indeed, I find my Japanese friends constantly inquiring about it. In better days than now there was quite a strong interest in the Republic of Ireland’s closer association with it—perhaps that will return when things improve on that front.

At one stage, even the Americans were asking about the need for a Commonwealth office in Washington.

That struck me as a little odd as they fought a whole war of independence to get away from us. It is also not the case that Britain is at the centre of some kind of hub-and- spoke arrangement, with member states sometimes depicted as outposts.

That belongs entirely to 20th-century thinking; it is completely out of date. Networks have strong links all around, but no centre; all are connected to all. Today, the Commonwealth is such a network—indeed, it is the largest that has ever formed in history. Modern, digitally empowered networks work away, grow at every level and never sleep. We must remember that, although Kigali was for Heads of Government, the Commonwealth is primarily a people's and grass-roots linked system, given new relevance—almost a sort of blood transfusion—by the technology of connectivity, Zoom and the age of the microchip. That is why, although some Governments may not see eye to eye and some may blatantly disregard the values embedded in the Commonwealth charter, which is always very regrettable, at the non-governmental level, the level of civil society, business and everyday life and work, a binding and integrating process nevertheless continues apace. This may sometimes be difficult for officials and diplomats to grasp, but it draws together a largely English-speaking nexus, with a vast and growing mesh or latticework of common interests in everything from science and law to health and education of all kinds.

This includes, for example, the largest long-distance learning system in the world through the Commonwealth of Learning based in Vancouver and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, with 500 or more universities on its books. Of course, parliamentarians connect through the lively Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which we all know. However, the linkages go far beyond governance to engineering, all kinds of technology and research, education at every level, health and medicine, magistrates and judges, architects and designers, every aspect of our culture, and, of course, sport, as we shall all be reminded shortly at the forthcoming Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. Indeed, the linkages go to all professions: the list of Commonwealth professional bodies, most of them now thriving, goes off the page because it is so long. Her Majesty the Queen described the Commonwealth a decade ago as, in many ways, “the face of the future” and that is exactly what the communications revolution has proved as time has gone by. I must say that her comments showed a good deal more insight and perceptiveness than some of her Ministers or some foreign policy experts or think-tank tyros. So that is the scene, but I have to ask my second question. Why does any of this matter to us here today in the UK, as we still seek to reposition ourselves globally after the Brexit drama and other changes?

First, all this activity covers areas where soft power and influence—ours is considerable and usually underrated—increasingly work best.

Secondly, it is true that in the last 50 years our trade and investment links with the Commonwealth countries have declined substantially. But now, as Asia rises and becomes the fastest and biggest growth area of the globe—pulling ahead not just economically, but in advanced technology and the education and skills to drive it—and as two-way direct investment flows open up again on a massive scale, the situation is reversing fast. These are the markets we need to be in and the official intention to join the rather heavily called Comprehensive and Progressive agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—CPTPP—underlines the fact. Incidentally, if and when we join, and we have the strong support of Japan in doing so, then more than half the members will be Commonwealth states. Beyond the CPTPP lies the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. We are not members of that at the moment but that will be, and indeed already is, by far the biggest world trading network of all.

Elsewhere, the new African Continental Free Trade Area opens out big new areas of economic exchange, on a continent all set for an immense population growth to about 1 billion by 2050.

That is the new picture on the trade side but, aside from all that, there is now a new geopolitical and security priority emerging. I very much wanted to get that into our debate today. Today, China is intruding into every part of the Commonwealth; not just commercially or via unrepayable loans but via military matters, officer training and even policing involvement. China understands what our experts often seem to overlook: small island states, far from being strategically unimportant, are now of immense strategic value in controlling maritime traffic, air traffic, GPS systems and even space. Hence, to take a current example, Chinese interest in establishing naval bases in places such as the Solomon Islands and having a footing, or outright control, in 96 port facilities in 53 countries scattered across the entire world, many of them Commonwealth. This is China's way of extending its naval reach against ours and pursuing its hegemonic strategy of rejecting what it sees as the Western, and especially American, lop-sided dominance of the globe.

Not a week goes by without news of China extending its distinctly military activities into new islands in the South Seas, to the utter dismay of our Australian ally, which takes these things very seriously, or the Caribbean

states, or the coastal states of Africa. I am not one of those dogmatic Sinophobes who thinks we have to break all links with China and regard it as a deadly enemy. In some key areas, such as energy and climate, we have to work with it closely and perhaps rather more cleverly than some of the American approaches in recent times. But if we let our Commonwealth network —our best means of transmitting our soft power—crumble or be nibbled away, then that undoubtedly will be a major foreign policy failure. Meanwhile, China, the Commonwealth and the Ukraine horror weave together. President Biden says that the world is united against Russian brutality. The West may be, but the developing world—so-called—is not. Too many Commonwealth members are reluctant to condemn the unprovoked Russian attack on a smaller nation. Their immediate reasons may be understandable but their preference for a sort of neutrality on Chinese lines, when such actions undermine the entire international order, is deeply concerning. There can be no neutrality between inhuman butchery, unprovoked aggression and ordered governance. No nation is safe from that kind of lawlessness. Via the belt and road initiative, double taxation and investment agreements and so on, the Chinese influence is creeping onwards. China now has BRI memorandums of understanding with 141 countries, including 38 of the Commonwealth's total of 54—about to be 56. That indeed is networking, but the wrong sort of networking from our point of view. What should be our chain of liberty against the autocrats, and the best containment of rising Chinese power in Asia and elsewhere, could well be turned on its head, becoming instead a spearhead of Chinese influence across the planet. My final question is: what should we do now, beyond all the initiatives that we have undoubtedly taken during our chairmanship? I was very glad to see that, at the G7 in Bavaria the other day, the idea of counterinfluence to the tentacles of the belt and road initiative was resurrected and developed. Of course, the Commonwealth is central to this. Using private enterprise in harmony with government policy, we certainly ought to be able to check the global march of the Chinese state and its corporate henchmen across the globe. While not matching all Chinese inducements, we should certainly be containing Chinese ambition. Further tests of which side one should be on may come up shortly, if and when China impatiently uses force against Taiwan. Are we ensuring that the Commonwealth will choose diplomacy and understanding against brutal aggression on that issue? Have we talked to them? Have we lined up the support of India on this one, in contrast to its wobblier stance on Russia? How does Pakistan fit in with its strong Chinese links, or Sri Lanka as it wallows in debt, or Malaysia or the African leaderships? We have been told repeatedly over the decades that we lack a role and a vision. To me, the role is now quite clear and has been for some time. At a time of enormous international instability, with old types of primitive warfare and new types of threat multiplying everywhere, our role is to uphold freedom under the law and to stand shoulder to shoulder with like-minded nations, large and small, in fruitful two-way partnerships and coalitions. In doing so, the Commonwealth is the key element of that mission. It is changing all the time and may well evolve into something different—that is possible. If so, we should be at the heart of it, creatively, constructively and imaginatively. Are we up to it? We should be straining every muscle of diplomacy to ensure that we work as closely as possible with the Commonwealth family. But this family needs to move from being seen sometimes by British officialdom as marginal and a slightly tiresome legacy to being a central component of our strategy, direction, role fulfilment and future security. That is the assurance we need from Ministers: that they understand what is happening and where we are going. As to the vision and presentation of our story in this new world we have entered, I admit that that needs some brushing up, but the time for doing that is now—before it is too late. I hope that this debate will assist in that respect. I beg to move.'

3.09pm