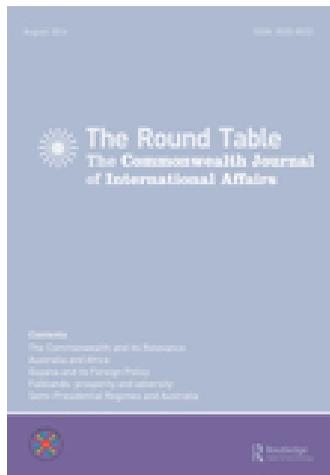


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The Forward March of the Commonwealth

Frank Field^a

^a Member of Parliament, Westminster, UK

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The Forward March of the Commonwealth

FRANK FIELD

Member of Parliament, Westminster, UK

ABSTRACT *This article decries the negativity which, in the opinion of the author, often characterises discussions on the Commonwealth. It is time, argues the author, to rejuvenate this 'largest free association of individuals and nations' and make it a vibrant force for global good. Of particular importance, he notes, is the need for the United Kingdom to strengthen its ties with the Commonwealth.*

KEY WORDS: Commonwealth, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, European Union, empire, human rights, international aid, trade

Introduction

What happens to the Commonwealth is as important to the world as it is to the United Kingdom. Yet such a statement lies uneasily with the political reality whereby most senior politicians in this country hardly mention this great organisation. It has largely fallen out of our political dialogue, almost as if it had never been. Worse still, the Commonwealth's senior friends group themselves into a vanguard who all too often simply express their despair about the Commonwealth's future. These loyal friends have a right to lament the carelessness of politicians. But the time has come to draw a line under this negativity that so characterises the debate.

I want to suggest a number of practical measures that could begin to lift the gloomy pall that lies heavily over this issue. Friends of the Commonwealth must cease to debate its decline as if standing around the bed of a mortally ill friend, and begin to plan an action-based rehabilitation. Such a course of action is not difficult to plan, nor much more difficult to carry out. It simply requires the will to do so.

We only have to spend a moment looking at the strengths and uniqueness of the Commonwealth for our spirits to begin to rise. Let me begin this spirit-raising exercise.

Strengths

By far and away its greatest strength comes from the simple but extraordinary fact that the Commonwealth is the largest free association of individuals and nations the world has ever seen. It is true to say today, as it once was of an empire that, however glorious, was not so democratic, that the sun never sets on this Commonwealth of Nations.

Correspondence Address: Frank Field, c/o House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA, UK. Email: frank.field.mp@parliament.uk

The Commonwealth has over a third of the world's population and that population inhabits every continent. The nations themselves come in every size, ranging from a mere 10,000 souls in Nauru to a simply astonishing 1.2 billion in India. It is not therefore a cartel of big boys who are in the business of dominating the playground. It is an organisation that is held together by a much more subtle means of association, where common interest and shared understanding, not force, is the link binding them together.

Perhaps more importantly, given the nature now of emerging world politics, the Commonwealth is made up of every major religion. There are currently estimated to be over one billion Hindus living within the Commonwealth borders, over 620 million Muslims, almost 440 million Christians and just over 32 million Buddhists. Even semi-detached political commentators are beginning to recognise the underlying religious basis, or division, to much of the hostility expressed between and within countries in today's world. To ignore this extraordinary array of religions, settled within the Commonwealth, is simply breathtaking.

The Commonwealth is representative in other ways of the world and age in which we live. Like the rest of the world, the size of the Commonwealth is growing, and growing younger, with 50% of Commonwealth subjects under 25 years old. The politics of a world growing younger will turn upside down the political agenda where age, wealth and power coincided in most countries.

As with the growth of population, so too is the economic power of the Commonwealth on the progressive march. As importantly, intra-Commonwealth trade is growing faster than trade generally. Between 1995 and 2012, the value of world export trade grew by 256%, whereas intra-Commonwealth export trade grew by 296%. This should not be a surprise. A common language, a common legal system, a culture that bears strong relationships across continents, has clear economic advantage. Some bodies estimate that it is up to 15% cheaper to complete trade deals within Commonwealth countries because of these natural advantages. Might it not therefore be more sensible to make much more of this very significant trading advantage?

The list of advantages continues. The Commonwealth plays to individual nations in a way that no other world grouping can. Each Commonwealth power is of importance in itself, but no Commonwealth power is today a true superpower. And, as from time immemorial, world powers can be difficult neighbours; hence the collective importance of the Commonwealth.

I believe it futile for the UK seriously to consider leaving the European Union. But a serious renegotiation is long overdue and part of the renegotiation ought to be to consider how, simultaneously, our political and economic leadership strengthens its ties with the Commonwealth. Indeed, I would maintain that the more successful Britain is in strengthening and rebuilding these ties, the less of a problem that Europe will pose in British politics. All relationships, if they are to endure, need regular revision.

The same need that Britain has for the Commonwealth applies, equally, to each Commonwealth country. Canada's daily existence is linked to that of the US. But the stronger its Commonwealth links are, the easier Canada finds it to deal sensibly with its all too powerful neighbour. Similarly, with Australia. Australian defence and foreign policy changed irreconcilably with the fall of Singapore. Looking to America as its chief protector was as natural as it was inevitable. But that relationship has never been, nor can be, that easy. The stronger the Commonwealth links are, the easier Australia will find it to set in proper context its dependence on America.

What is said of Australia can similarly be said of Pakistan and India. And, although it is unloved at the moment, it can similarly be said of Sri Lanka.

Merely to list these assets raises one of the Commonwealth's greatest strength. As well as the nations and peoples, it is, in the words of Her Majesty, nothing if it is not also a family. And the growth in modern technology, as Lord Howell reminds us, is making that family connection more not less important.

This brings me to the last of the Commonwealth's great strengths: its power of renewal. Can anyone name from history an organisation to match not only the very nature of the Commonwealth, but also its powers of renewal to survive and prosper whatever world events have to throw at it? Has any other world grouping even attempted to make the transition that has been so successfully made by former colonial countries seeking a free association with what is now rather benignly called the mother country that planned and executed such an ambitious empire strategy? In a moment I come on to the move which that mother country must make to ensure the next development stage of the Commonwealth can take place most easily. But if we look back over the past 60 years, the most dominant characteristic is how the Commonwealth has changed and yet prospered. How might we then plan for the next 60 years, knowing, of course, that politics involves far more than planning?

I want to put before you a tenfold action plan or—a rehabilitation agenda. These reforms are not listed by a hierarchy of importance. If this action-based reform programme has any advantage, it is that different members, countries and regions of the Commonwealth might attach different importance to different parts of the programme. The aim is to get the programme discussed in terms of live politics.

Human Rights

Human rights are understandably an obsession for much of the western world. But a human rights programme can look rather different in those countries that believe that it is being imposed upon them. It can look less freedom-orientated than the new imperialists believe it to be. I say this as someone who is almost as committed to a human rights programme as anyone on the centre-left of politics. I just happen to believe, however, that there are different ways of achieving this goal.

If I were responsible for a country with large numbers of people facing terrible onslaughts of hunger and disease, I would be more interested in the practical moves and support that are necessary to encourage my country's economic development than I would be with what I could too easily see as yet another part in the political pageant of signing human rights declarations. So might we not best view human rights from the other end of this western telescope? Might not developing Commonwealth countries begin better to appreciate the importance of human rights when they see that its immediate political advantage is that of encouraging that inward investment which developing countries so badly need if their governments are to raise basic living standards? Once a developing country's political class begins to see human rights in these terms, that guaranteeing a rule of law, a freedom of association, and so on, are the basic building blocks for greater inward investment to take place, might not a greater convergence occur across different Commonwealth countries in their attitude to human rights and, further, that a human rights programme is a precursor to, not a distraction from, let alone the enemy of, economic progress?

International Aid

One of the most important recent international initiatives in Britain has been the reorientation and reallocation begun by Andrew Mitchell during his time as Secretary of State for International Development in making Commonwealth countries a greater priority for our growing aid budget. A useful future idea for a Heads of Commonwealth Summit should include planning by both donor and recipient on the kinds of development programme that can best foster Commonwealth links.

The Commonwealth should therefore commit to establishing itself as a premier development body. Although its budget is relatively small, its budget can have a multiplying effect. It must audit its work and focus on the areas where it enjoys a comparative advantage. Similarly, we should help develop a Commonwealth strategy in those international bodies, such as the World Bank, that direct and influence much of the aid programme.

Targeted, flexible and responsive development assistance is highly effective in promoting Commonwealth values in member states. The Commonwealth Secretariat should be tasked with undertaking a detailed audit of both development constraints in Commonwealth countries and how they can be addressed by the Commonwealth Secretariat and assistance from other member states. There is an urgent need to broaden engagement with a wider circle of civil society and private sector partners. The Secretariat must focus on interventions that can have a catalytic effect for bigger projects.

A Premier Lobby Group

The claim that Commonwealth countries gain more by membership than by ceasing to be members needs to be recalculated. But while that process is ongoing, the Commonwealth leadership should commit itself, as well as being an active influence on the distribution of aid, to becoming the premier lobbying organisation in the world. In other respects, this should include vowing never to let a senior post go by—whether it is at the World Bank or at the United Nations (UN), or any other relevant international body—without a serious attempt by the Commonwealth to field a candidate. Of course we will not agree on every post, but we can do a lot more than we currently do in putting forward Commonwealth candidates.

Similarly, despite the difficulties, the Commonwealth should begin to organise itself at every international gathering, particularly the UN. Some of you will have noticed that I have omitted from the current strengths of the Commonwealth the numbers of votes it has at the UN. Commonwealth countries hold almost 30% of votes at the UN. There are of course siren voices cautioning against any such move—that any exercise here would be futile; that it would be an own-goal. But would it? And can we say that for certain without trying such a strategy? I would advocate that UN Commonwealth countries should begin with a minimal programme seeking a Commonwealth stance and, on that success, build more ambitiously.

Trade

Great changes in world trading are negotiated by the World Trade Organisation, and no time should be spent trying to create an alternative Commonwealth body. But it is

possible, practical and desirable both to plan trade on a bilateral basis and, even more importantly, to plan bilateral inwards investment. Again I would suggest modest beginnings that can be built on. The Commonwealth is ideally placed to begin such regional negotiations, for example, with those African countries with rich mining resources. One of the Commonwealth countries should be given the responsibility, say with the Royal Commonwealth Society, to begin organising, maybe twice a year, summits at which a handful of mineral-rich Commonwealth countries ensure that their relevant ministers meet mine-owning executives. The agenda would be to try to create longer-term political stability, which could lead to significant increases in inward investment.

The idea of the Commonwealth also organising on a regional basis for some issues was not a throw-away comment. I believe we should see much more decentralisation of initiative to Commonwealth countries on those issues on which they are best placed to take the lead.

Symbolism

Symbolism can of course be a form of politics that leads nowhere, or it can act sacramentally giving signs that outward changes reflect a greater inward transformation. The most dramatic move I would like to see the UK government make is to ask the other Commonwealth countries whether it might join. As a prelude to this, it would remove that part of the 1931 Statute of Westminster whereby the British Commonwealth of Nations was formally brought into statutory existence. The word British should be struck from the Commonwealth statute.

This move should then be followed up by having a Foreign Office that reflects the importance we now attach to our different activities. I would suggest that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office be renamed the Commonwealth, European and Foreign Office. That changing of name must be reflected in a change in the power structure within today's Foreign Office. Those within and those about to join must realise that the sheer scope of jobs is weighted towards the Commonwealth and that, in all likelihood, future heads of office will come from the Commonwealth rather than from the European desks. The dynamics of British foreign policy would accordingly change.

Spreading success, rather than gloom, ought again to become a Commonwealth characteristic. Britain should take a leaf out of Canada's book in appointing an ambassador to the Commonwealth. The aim should not be an afterthought. Its ranking should be carefully chosen to equal those of the US, Brussels or the UN. It should become a major career post for ambitious Foreign Office diplomats.

Malta

These changes should be accompanied by actively working on the agenda for the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malta. The choice of country could not be better, nor the choice of its political leadership. I would suggest the premier of Malta seeks the permission of the other Commonwealth countries to begin work on the next CHOGM agenda, and that two items above all should head the list.

The first is to agree to opening up the selection of the next Secretary General. By the time of the selection of the next Commonwealth Secretary General in 2016, the

informal system of 'regional rotation' will be complete. We must move on from this system. It is essential that Commonwealth members give their backing to the development of a transparent, merit-based selection system. This will help to ensure that the Commonwealth can choose the very best candidate from right across all 54 countries.

Malta should be given the authority to initiate an open selection process for the next Commonwealth Secretary General. Candidates should be invited to apply for the post setting out how they see what their role can be in beginning a process of development and Commonwealth transformation that begins to match the last 60 years. Likewise, it should begin the process of preparing for the Commonwealth to debate how it is prepared to admit countries to its membership. These two reforms by themselves could have a transforming effect. We have seen in Pope Francis the power of having the right person in the right post at the right time. The Commonwealth should seek a similar transforming leader.

Action-orientated Programme

This is my last suggestion and one of the most important. Not since the anti-apartheid movement has the Commonwealth had a great moral issue with which to bind itself together to influence the course of world history. I believe that, for the Commonwealth to prosper as an association, it once again needs to start setting the agenda on some of the major global issues of the day. I wish to suggest three programmes that could have a similar transforming effect on both Commonwealth and world politics.

Taking a global lead on climate change and the protection of rainforests would be an excellent start. Not only do many Commonwealth countries have large areas of primary rainforest that are under threat, but a large number of Commonwealth nations are also already disproportionately feeling the negative impacts of climate change. Small states in particular contribute very little in terms of emissions but are bearing the brunt of the negative impacts. Fifty-two per cent of countries classified by the UN as small island developing states are in the Commonwealth.

It is estimated that the Commonwealth houses 268 million hectares of rainforest across 19 countries. This forest, however, is being felled at an accelerating rate, contrary to a global trend against rainforest destruction. Global rainforest deforestation rates have fallen back in recent years, as a result mainly of international pressure proactively preventing deforestation. Between 2005 and 2010 7.4 million hectares were lost each year (an annual reduction rate of 0.43%), compared with 7.6 million hectares in the previous five years (0.43%). However, the reverse is true for Commonwealth countries, which have seen an acceleration in rainforest deforestation: 0.57% per year (2005–10), compared with 0.47% (2000–5).

Let us agree that we have spent enough time signing declarations against climate change. As each signing ceremony has come so has the sea level risen, threatening a growing number of Commonwealth countries. We do not need to debate the causes of climate change—merely to observe it is going on, and to realise, in the words of James Lovelock, the great environmental scientist, that the one thing we can do to try and slow down the rate of climate change is to safeguard our rainforests.

The Commonwealth is linked across continents, and within those continents are custodians to crucially important rainforests. My first suggestion is to ask a body such as the Royal Commonwealth Society, and Cool Earth, a rainforest charity, to begin

working out the practicalities for those richer Commonwealth countries who have given funds to safeguard rainforests—such as to the World Bank—to consider using some of those payments to pay Commonwealth countries with rainforest a rent to ensure that it is more profitable to keep the forest standing than it is to decimate it. The aim must be to establish a Commonwealth global canopy.

Second, there are now more slaves in existence than when William Wilberforce saw on to the statute book the abolition of this evil activity. Slavery is present everywhere, but over-represented in Commonwealth countries. It is now increasingly acknowledged as one of the major evils of our time, and is a significant impediment to development. It negatively affects a huge range of Commonwealth countries, including source countries, such as Nigeria, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and destination countries, such as the UK, Canada and Australia. For long-term solutions to be achieved it is vital that source and destination countries partner each other closely together.

The British government is currently piloting a bill to abolish modern slavery. I chaired the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee whose sole aim was to ensure that we end up with a truly world leading piece of legislation.

A key part of this bill must be to move progressively towards cleansing supply chains of slavery. Here is a campaign that could be as important to a human rights strategy as could any programme, and could again give the Commonwealth a moral crusade equal to that against apartheid. Indeed, the similarities between the two statuses are too painful to draw. No other major international association is yet taking a global lead on modern slavery—this is a chance for the Commonwealth to demonstrate leadership on this issue.

The third area is to build again on one of the Commonwealth's great strengths, namely its education programme. For over 50 years the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Programme (CSFP) has proved to be one of the Commonwealth's most effective and visible programmes. Over 29,000 scholars and fellows have benefited. They are a cost-effective way of widening opportunities for young people across the Commonwealth. The established track record and Commonwealth branding of these scholarships give them additional prestige and recognition, which cannot be easily recreated. Tertiary education offers an opportunity for people to lift themselves from poverty and to enjoy better employment and career advancement opportunities. In doing so, the same people are able to contribute more to their nations' tax bases.

The overwhelming majority of students returns home (between 85 and 92%). Of the remainder, a high proportion are working on projects directly relevant to their home countries. Strong evidence exists to confirm that Commonwealth scholars rise to positions of influence following their scholarships. Over 200 have already been identified as reaching the rank of Cabinet minister, Permanent Secretary, High Court judge, Central Bank governor or university vice chancellor.

Strong and adequately resourced central coordination of the programme is required. At present smaller countries, or those considering making awards for the first time, have nowhere to turn for advice and assistance. The Secretary General should be mandated proactively to promote the CSFP and appoint one staff member to coordinate the plan.

The range and type of scholarships should be widened to encourage entrepreneurship, innovation and business studies. It would also be beneficial if those governments with existing bilateral scholarship and fellowship awards associated their programmes with fellow Commonwealth countries and with the CSFP.

Finally, I turn to a catalyst of change. The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) is a painful parable of recent Commonwealth events. It is no longer, sadly, a place for members of the Commonwealth to gather together when in London. An alternative is that it should become one of the Commonwealth's major think tanks. To this goal, it should seek to be owned by other Commonwealth governments, and to this end for those governments to see that a civil service posting to the RCS would be advantageous both to an individual's career and for the development of necessary skills within their own civil service. This model, hopefully, could then be rolled out on a regional basis, again using the RCS structure to achieve this goal. The RCS ought similarly to be seen as a proper base from which a number of the action research projects—such as creating a Commonwealth global canopy—is conducted.

Conclusion

Could there be a more exciting prospect than the next 60 years of the Commonwealth's life? Could there be a more fitting memorial to the current Head of the Commonwealth than to begin planning and then actively implementing a programme of Commonwealth change and development to equal the changes we have witnessed over the last 60 years? There is so much about the Commonwealth to suggest that it is better placed to meet the challenges countries and regions now face than any other world group or organisation. And to realise that end, I hope I have begun to establish an agenda that could help begin this long but fruitful journey.