

Britain and the Commonwealth: A Change of Gear.

By David Howell. 15.02.18

Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings have hardly been Britain's highest priority in recent decades. Prime Ministers have tended to make their attendances as brief as possible, while the media have confined their coverage to dazzling pictures of the Queen receiving the various heads of state for dinner.

This time it looks to be quite different. As a recent hearing by the Lords International Relations Committee with the key officials spearheading preparations confirmed, London is pulling out all the stops for the next CHOGM, due in mid-April. It is being built up into a major Summit event, with three days of forums beforehand, Windsor Castle being thrown open to the 52 Government leaders and a full turnout expected. Events are being organised all over the country, business and civil society deeply involved and positive outcomes and initiatives promised not just on the trade and investment fronts but in the security field, the cyber domain, and in a string of 'soft power' areas such as education, research, human rights and more.

Whereas before, a handful of officials in a distinctly disinterested Foreign and Commonwealth Office struggled to maintain interest in Commonwealth matters, now the whole issue has been whisked into the Cabinet Office, with a reputed eighty staff beavering away, not just at Summit preparations but at longer term repair of Commonwealth relationships and a whole new agenda of links, both economic and political. Substantial teams have also been assembled in DFID, BIS and the International Trade Department.

Three major and impelling forces are bringing about this extraordinary change of gear.

The first and most obvious is of course Brexit. Attention has had to shift to new markets and new networks and today's Commonwealth turns out to offer both of these on a global scale.

To some extent the London venue is fortuitous. The decision to stage the next CHOGM in London was taken back in 2015 in Malta, long before Brexit was even a gleam in the eye. But now it is here, with Britain in the chair for the next two years or so, things suddenly look very different.

To some, both in politics and in Whitehall, this has clearly come not only as a surprise but also very late in the day. More than twenty years ago a Commons Foreign Affairs Committee issued a report on the Future of the Commonwealth. Its message was that the Commonwealth, far from being a redundant organisation, was transforming itself into a modern network of enormous potential, both economic and political, with rising India – half the entire Commonwealth’s 2.4 billion population – at its centre.

The message went nowhere. Its views were met with icy disregard. This was a time when all the talk was of the European ‘project’ being Britain’s destiny and the ‘only game in town’. To the foreign policy-making community, it seemed incredible – indeed impossible – that one day these old Commonwealth friends, who had been given such short shrift when Britain acceded to the EU, would be needed as new friends. That day now seems to have arrived.

The second reason for a change of attitude lies deeper and outside immediate events. The Commonwealth is by no means the only ‘answer’ to Britain’s post-Brexit role in the world, nor some kind of substitute for continued good access to neighbouring European markets. But in an age of expanding networks driven by algorithms of unimaginable power and influence, it is certainly one of the networks in which Britain must, and ought to be able to, succeed and which provides valuable gateways to tomorrow’s markets in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Thanks to digitalisation and information dispersal on a scale unmatched in human history, power and opportunity lie increasingly with the crowd, the grass roots and the myriad impulses of markets, interests and civil society groups – all with their own growing network linkages. By chance, and by nobody’s plan, the modern Commonwealth network has evolved in a manner precisely suited to this new 21st century milieu. The visible side may be heads of government meeting – but not always agreeing. But the far bigger side of the Commonwealth lies beneath the official surface in a mesh of unparalleled connections, every day, every hour and between every conceivable party, profession and age-group.

The third impelling reason for revived Commonwealth interest lies perhaps more in the field of national psychology than immediate national goals. It has become a commonplace that Britain lacks a ‘story’, a clear sense of direction and national purpose in an alarmingly disruptive world and age.

The planet-wide network of affinities and like-mindedness which the Commonwealth has become, with its common working language, does offer

some kind of framework for national endeavour. It may not make us a leading nation in the old sense, but it does make us a highly influential member of a family of nations and peoples, most of them young, who are going to take centre stage in the future. Properly explained, that can give us both a vision and a future purpose. Brexit has pulled us apart; the Commonwealth story, properly explained, could help pull us together – something worth working for.