

Where now for the Commonwealth after the week-long London Heads of Government meeting? – Evening Standard 03.05.18

BY DAVID HOWELL

There are plenty of people ready to downplay the Commonwealth's future. What have 53 disparate nations, they ask, from giants such as India to tiny island states such as Nauru, conceivably got in common other than a bit of history — and for newcomers Mozambique and Rwanda, not even that? And what about the patchy human rights and gender-equality records in some member countries?

The mistake of these critics is to expect governments to make all the running. But the reality for the Commonwealth's future lies as much in a huge range of non-governmental entities — the professions, universities, private sector, civil society organisations — quietly knitting together all the time, boosted by new technology and today's connectivity.

This is now a global soft-power game of networks, not a diplomatic chessboard. And membership seems to pay off in trade expansion and attracting investment, such as in Rwanda, the venue for the next summit in two years' time. It is no wonder that several others are eager to join.

The Commonwealth neither has, nor needs, heavy direction from the top. There is no comparison with, say, the EU, no agonising negotiations to join or leave. As Bill Gates observed during the summit week, this makes the Commonwealth, with its voluntary nature, diversity and common English working language, common legal systems and numerous other affinities, ideally suited to the new age.

That said, it is obvious that India, the world's largest democracy, is the key to the whole future, being home to half the Commonwealth's population and about to overtake Britain in GDP. The Indo-Pacific region is fast becoming the centre of the new world order (such as it is) in economic and security terms.

The increasing Indian world role accounts for interest in the Commonwealth from another surprising source. When I visited Washington recently, it was explained to me that Trump's new American policy in Asia saw India as part of a key alliance, along with Japan and Australia, to "balance" the Chinese potential domination of the whole region.

But all this could be overtaken. The Chinese leader Xi Jinping has been on the phone to the Indian PM, Narendra Modi , with a competing offer of "a new partnership".

We are seeing a new kind of great game here on a far bigger scale than the 20th-century version. And the Commonwealth is part of it. As Britain seeks new markets and a new role it is right to get firmly reconnected with a network which, for the past 40 years, it has frankly neglected.

*David Howell is President of the Royal Commonwealth Society. His new book, *The Mother of All Networks*, is published by Gilgamesh*