

UK influence after Brexit: the Commonwealth should be seen as a network, not as an excuse



Portraying the Commonwealth as a group of trading partners who share similar values and that will bolster the UK's influence and prosperity after Brexit is at best delusional, writes [Fred Carver](#). He argues that while the Commonwealth can be used as a diplomatic network in certain cases, it should not be used as a catch-all excuse for trade and foreign policy issues arising from Brexit.

What is the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth [is not](#) a trading block. On that the experts are clear. It is not a geographic block. It has no political or executive functions and seems unlikely to develop in that direction any time soon. There was some suggestion that the Commonwealth [could reinvent itself as a community of shared values](#) – a progressive opt-in alternative to some of the less selective global or regional groupings. A noble goal, it now appears that opportunity has been missed. The lack of political support for a values-driven Commonwealth was demonstrated when the [2013 Commonwealth Summit](#) and subsequent presidency was awarded to a regime in Sri Lanka that was under investigation by the United Nations for [massacring civilians in the thousands](#). Perhaps it was inevitable that a network that emerged from empire would have similarly archaic values: 20 commonwealth members [impose the death penalty](#) and 36 criminalise homosexuality.



Parliament House, Canberra, Australia. [JJ Harrison](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Commonwealth had a better past record when it came to defending democracy: it [nobly opposed](#) the disenfranchisement of South Africa's majority community under its apartheid government and more recently suspended [Fiji](#), [Nigeria](#) and [Pakistan](#) following military coups. But given the Commonwealth currently boasts a member which recently re-elected their President with [98.79% of the vote on a 98.15% turnout](#), it is stretching credibility to suggest that the Commonwealth could find a raison d'être as a defender of democratic principles.

It performs some humanitarian and developmental work, although it is a relatively small player: its [£50 million annual budget](#) making it less than an [eighth the size of Oxfam](#). This work also has its critics: a DfID [report on multilateral donors](#) placed the Commonwealth Secretariat bottom of its list of agencies according to the metric: "match with UK development objectives" and cited it as one of four "poorest performers" and one of two agencies who "have not done enough" following a previous assessment that also listed it among the "poorest performers".

The Commonwealth is further burdened by its problematic colonial history, the legacy of an empire that the UK has done too little to come to terms with. Other former imperial powers have arguably come further. The Dutch, as the superpower that immediately preceded British hegemony, have provided a blueprint for growing old gracefully and managing the nation's transition into mid-level force for good with global reach. Dutch schools [do not sugar-coat](#) the nation's imperial legacy, and the Netherlands have pointedly not established a Dutch Commonwealth.

Yes, France has its Francophonie and Portugal its Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), but neither country expects these organisations to perform important foreign policy functions for them. Where France looks to have influence in the Francophonie it pays for it in full: such as by its significant investment in troops and materiel for its interventions in the Central African Republic and Mali.

In this context, some of the language coming out of the UK about the role the Commonwealth could play in bolstering the UK's post-Brexit global influence and prosperity appears [at best delusional](#), and at worst a reimagining of an [Empire 2.0](#). The Commonwealth pursues very few joint initiatives, sport aside, and [less than 10%](#) of UK trade exports go to Commonwealth countries.

Nevertheless, the Commonwealth does have its potential uses. It is, as Lord Ahmed, minister for the UN and for the Commonwealth, [told the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee](#), a network. Networks, both formal and informal, with their various overlapping memberships, form the backbone of multilateral diplomacy independent of the reason for which they were formed. The Commonwealth has an interesting and diverse membership including rising African (South Africa and Nigeria) and BRIC (India) powers, several Small Island Development State (SIDS) members and significant overlap with the [G77](#) and [NAM](#) states. As such it has the potential to help the UK build bridges to the General Assembly at a time when such relations are [at a low ebb](#).

However, networks are only as useful as the use they are put to. It is currently unclear what, if any, use the UK intends for its Commonwealth network. As the [House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee](#) said in its response to the Government the FCO must "clarify what it is about common membership of the Commonwealth that distinguishes the UK's relationships with ... Commonwealth members and ... set out a long-term vision for the UK's relationship with the Commonwealth."

Were the Commonwealth network to be harnessed in support of shared priorities at the UN – be they on gender equality, reform of the UN's development system, or modern slavery – then it could play a useful role in mobilising action at the General Assembly and its various committees. But if nothing concrete is placed on the table, or if too much is expected, or too little invested, or if the UK continues to fail to come to terms with its colonial and postcolonial legacy, then the risk remains that the Commonwealth will offer little more than a distraction to the true task of developing a [meaningful foreign policy](#) for the post-Brexit age.

About the Author



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