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The Commonwealth: A wasted asset



Douglas Scott Proudfoot is a former Canadian Ambassador who served as head of mission in Bamako, Juba and Ramallah. He was previously posted in Vienna (where he represented Canada at the IAEA, CTBTO and UNODC), London, Delhi and Nairobi. At headquarters he headed the Afghanistan and Sudan Task Forces. Most recently he headed the Canadian mission to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). He is currently based in Ottawa. Areas of expertise include Africa; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; fragile states & post-conflict situations; non-proliferation, arms control & disarmament; aviation; and, of course, Canada.

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The biennial summit of Commonwealth countries, with the unattractive acronym CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting), will take place in Antigua at the beginning of November. Some may well ask why they bother? But the association and its gatherings offer unique opportunities that are too often passed over.

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The sun never sets

Commonwealth countries, taken together, number 56, over a quarter of the membership of the UN, and account for 2.7 billion people, about a third of the world's population. They span all continents, and include two G7 and five G20 states, as well as four of the ten most populous countries and many of its tiniest, notably the small island states of the Caribbean and Pacific. It is the world in microcosm, and not all that micro in fact.

It has never been a political or economic bloc, though when acting in concert, as it has on issues large and small, it can be highly effective: it was at the forefront of international efforts to end Apartheid, and its election monitoring missions do encourage respect for democratic norms.

Its combined economy, at US$19 trillion, sounds big, but represents only about a sixth of the world economy. After all, most of its members are developing countries. But there is "Commonwealth advantage" to trade between Commonwealth countries, with an ease of doing business based on shared commercial practices and contract law that lowers transaction costs by 19-21%. As a result, they trade 20% more amongst themselves than they would with other, equivalent, countries, and invest three to four times more.

Add the Commonwealth Games, the scholarship schemes, and even the War Graves Commission, and activities arising from the Commonwealth touch many lives in unexpected ways.

What did the Romans ever do for us?

If Britain acquired an empire in a fit of absent mindedness, its amnesia in the aftermath of empire is remarkable. Moreso than other former imperial powers, Britain is often abashed about, or even unaware of, its past. France, with *Françafrique*, and later through La Francophonie, has consciously sought to capitalise on its historical links, albeit not always successfully. The concept of a "Russkiy Mir" remains central to Moscow's identity, with even worse outcomes.

Imperial nostalgia in Britain remains a fringe taste; imperial hangover is more prevalent. For a while, the Commonwealth briefly enjoyed a certain lustre among Brexiteers, until they understood what it really is. But recognising and working with the legacy of the sombre history of imperialism is not the same as celebrating that history. Instead, Britain tends to close its eyes, nurse the hangover, and neglect its obligations. Britain's conflicting attitudes to the Commonwealth are part of that.

Among Commonwealth countries, attitudes to the colonial era are also ambivalent. The collective memory of subjugation remains strong, giving rise, for example, to the call for compensation for the Atlantic slave trade. The peoples of former imperial possessions naturally reject any rehabilitation of a system responsible for the oppression and exploitation of their countries, but they also prize certain elements of that legacy. When the winds of change swept Africa in the 50s and 60s, no sooner had liberation movements shaken off their colonial chains than they embraced the useful elements of the colonial heritage, whether railways, parliament, common law, or cricket. West African judges look magnificent in powdered wigs, but there are reasons better than swank that they keep wearing them, despite the heat.

The Commonwealth expresses that enduring legacy, but more importantly, it also connects countries in every region which share some of that legacy, and provides a unique forum bringing together a cross-section of the world.

What is striking is that Commonwealth member states seldom quit, and those who storm off in a huff, or are otherwise ushered out the door, such as Pakistan (multiple times) or South Africa, usually sue to return. A few countries who might be members, such as Ireland and Burma, chose not to pursue membership. And others are queueing up to join, including those with no constitutional connexion to Britain. Mozambique, Rwanda, Togo and Gabon are now members, with the last three joining mainly to cock a snook at Paris. Countries are expected to subscribe to the "Commonwealth values" proclaimed in its charter, including democracy and human rights, but those principles are as often breached as observed.

Underinvestment, paltry return

If the Commonwealth did not exist, we would *not* have to invent it. But it does exist and Commonwealth countries keep turning up; yet they usually fail to take advantage of the opportunities it offers. It is only doomed to depreciate into irrelevance if its members do not maintain and make something of it. Britain's reluctance to make the Commonwealth a vector of influence is perhaps understandable, but other countries with global ambitions – Canada, Australia, Nigeria, South Africa and above all India – tend not to make use of it as a foreign policy

tool. At the last CHOGM, in Samoa in 2024, the leaders of South Africa and India preferred to attend the BRICS summit in Kazan, while the Canadian Prime Minister of the day stayed home to deal with a caucus revolt. The draw for smaller countries is a chance to rub shoulders, and sit around the table as peers, with a Burnham, Carney or Modi. One of the Commonwealth's innovations, now widely emulated, is to add to the summit a retreat, where leaders meet without officials.

Leaving aside the networking opportunity, and the communiqués they churn out, a summit without a mountain beneath it is just a hillock. The effort countries devote to the Commonwealth and its institutions is meager. And those institutions are starved for resources, even more than other multilateral bodies. The Commonwealth Secretariat, lodged in a grand 18th century pile in St James's, is staffed by fewer than a hundred professionals meant to prepare and implement decisions.

Meanwhile, Commonwealth member states expect those institutions to do a bit of everything, with predictable results. Secretariat technical assistance programmes are underpowered and underfinanced, and far too diffuse. This problem was recognised at the 2009 CHOGM, which tasked an Eminent Persons Group to consider and recommend reforms, including doing fewer things better. Some of its recommendations were adopted, but the Commonwealth carried on much as before. A stronger Commonwealth would focus on areas of strength and unique advantage, in the legislative, legal, educational and perhaps publishing sectors.

The Commonwealth is more than its institutions, and in many ways its heart is not the Secretariat but the myriad civil society groupings it has spawned, many of which have no obvious reason to be Commonwealth-based. An example is the Commonwealth Association of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition, a worthy and active association doing meaningful work on a vital issue, though unclear why the Commonwealth is the best vehicle to advance child health, or whether the challenges to child health are different in Commonwealth countries than in any other.

Perhaps the Commonwealth`s greatest value is in affording the chance for exchanges among those from different regions, with very different perspectives, but who share a certain common understanding, and who, literally, speak the same language. For it to thrive and offer its members more, those members, starting with the largest and most powerful, must invest in it, not just cash but effort and attention.

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