

Sam Bidwell and Jonathan Heywood

The Commonwealth Today and Tomorrow

An Entirely

New

Conception

Centre for Commonwealth Affairs



*with an introductory essay from Lord Howell
of Guildford*

An Entirely New Conception

Introducing a new policy centre for
Commonwealth affairs

Sam Bidwell and Jonathan Heywood

*with an opening essay by Lord Howell of Guildford on the
UK Case for a Commonwealth Policy*



Centre for Commonwealth Affairs

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'What is the Centre for Commonwealth Affairs?'

An introduction to the new CENTRE FOR COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS, its aims and policy objectives

by Sam Bidwell and Jonathan Heywood

The Centre for Commonwealth Affairs – a new policy engine for the world's largest network. Bringing together minds from business, politics, and diplomacy to put together workable, practicable policies for pan-Commonwealth co-operation - building a network of members and partners across the globe, connecting people from all walks of life, and giving the Commonwealth an active and sustained voice in the UK's policy conversation.

So why is such a Centre necessary – and why now?

Anybody who can see the potential of the Commonwealth will be frustrated by the lack of progress. Despite significant excitement in the wake of Brexit, and the slow awakening in Westminster to the growing prosperity of Asia and Africa, little of substance has moved. Where we have seen a British re-engagement with Commonwealth affairs, the focus has been squarely bilateral. Looking at the big, global network of organisations bearing the 'Commonwealth' name, it would be easy to ascribe the lack of progress to a problem with the mission itself.

If the combined might of the eighty-seven accredited organisations supporting the work of the Commonwealth can't move us towards closer network relations then what is missing?

Existing Commonwealth advocacy institutions focus on building vital commercial and cultural links, an approach very much in keeping with the Commonwealth's infamously decentralised nature. An interweaving web of business relationships, academic partnerships, and personal connections spans the globe, giving enduring relevance to this diplomatic sleeping giant.



But what can elevate the Commonwealth from a loose network of globe-spanning ‘little platoons’ to a respected international network worthy of close engagement?

In a word, policy. The policy component of the Commonwealth space is small and infrequent, well-received when it occasionally rears its head, but typically dormant. Without policy, the Commonwealth has become just one of many pleasant ideas which eludes practical political implementation.

The Centre for Commonwealth Affairs will rise meet this challenge, bringing together diverse minds from all over the Commonwealth, putting together research and actionable policy. In an age of heightened connectivity, the ability for policy ideas to disperse and germinate has never been greater. Never before have we had the opportunity for a truly **global** policy conversation, addressing issues which transcend nations and regions, giving a voice to Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, all in a single breath.

All too often, Commonwealth-facing policymaking in Britain is the preserve of a section of the political right who regard renewed Commonwealth ties as an alternative to close partnerships in Europe. In spite of the ambitions of this small group, the Commonwealth has outgrown whatever its initial purpose may have been – the question of ‘what’s in it for Britain?’ is no longer sufficient to move the dial. The potential rewards have multiplied exponentially, alongside a growth in the number of sensitive issues which must be carefully considered in plotting out a course.

As such, the Centre for Commonwealth Affairs will operate as an **international membership organisation and policy forum**, enabling vibrant minds and experienced heads to exchange ideas and work on ambitious long-term projects.

We intend to cooperate closely with partners not just in politics, diplomacy, and business, but with the existing Commonwealth advocacy network, whose work we will supplement and support.



We are also incredibly fortunate to be supported by Lord Howell of Guildford, a member of Parliament since 1966, a part of the Government under three Prime Ministers, a prolific writer, and a long-standing advocate for closer Commonwealth ties. His essay below, 'An Entirely New Conception', explores the development of the Commonwealth network and the opportunity that it presents. Without his wise counsel and consistent support, the launch of the Centre would not have been possible; for this, I am immensely grateful.

You can find out more about us at our website – commonwealthaffairs.co.uk – or on Twitter - [@commonwealthcca](https://twitter.com/commonwealthcca) – where we post updates on our activities, and information about the modern Commonwealth. You can also [sign up for membership or donate](#) in order to support our activities. Members will have access to our 'This Week In The Commonwealth' newsletter, released each week, cut-price access to vibrant social events, and a chance to contribute to our research. We rely on the support of those who value our mission, so please consider lending a hand today.

Below are just some of the policy areas that we plan to explore in the coming months, addressing worldwide challenges in close partnership with political, diplomatic, and business figures from across all fifty-six Commonwealth member states.

Join us on our journey.



The Centre for Commonwealth Affairs

Policy Pathway

A look at the next few years of pan-Commonwealth policy at the CCA



A Modern Approach to Commonwealth Trade:

Reviewing the Secretary-General's target for \$2 trillion in intra-Commonwealth trade by 2030 and exploring opportunities for closer Commonwealth trade and investment ties.

Defence and Security Framework:

Setting out the case for closer defence and security partnerships within the Commonwealth, and for a formal framework in which those partnerships can take place.



A Maritime Commonwealth:

Exploring the role of the Commonwealth as an influence on maritime policy, international law and global institutions, and the potential for a unified Commonwealth approach to maritime security.

Partnerships for Better Development Outcomes:

Considering the establishment of a unified Commonwealth Development Council, which pools the resources of some of the world's largest development donors to achieve better outcomes for Commonwealth member states.





The Constitution and the Commonwealth Realms:

Clarifying and strengthening the role of a modern, international monarchy, both in the Commonwealth Realms and in the King's broader capacity as Head of the Commonwealth.

Academic and Scientific Cooperation:

Deepening and expanding opportunities for academic and scientific cooperation, from international student exchanges and research partnerships to space exploration.



Facing the Climate and Energy Challenge:

Identifying areas for cooperation on climate and energy policy, as rising sea levels, ecological disaster, global migration, and climate finance remain high on the Commonwealth agenda.

Structuring the Commonwealth for Success:

Reviewing the structures of the Commonwealth itself and considering new strategies for expanding membership and leveraging a vast global network of supporters.





'An Entirely New Conception'

*The Modern Commonwealth's Central Role in our Future, and the case for a new
CENTRE FOR COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS in putting it there.*

by Lord Howell of Guildford

"The Commonwealth bears no resemblance to the empires of the past. It is an entirely new conception built on the highest qualities of the spirit of humankind: friendship, loyalty, and the desire for freedom and peace."

The late Queen Elizabeth the Second

Few would question that digitalization is causing a radical reordering of traditional boundaries and relationships worldwide – both in advanced societies and in the anachronistically labelled, 'developing' world.

Yet while businesses everywhere are rethinking their strategies and relationships in the face of super-fast connections and advanced analytics, governments, diplomats and policy experts have been remarkably slow to apply the same lessons to international relations and institutions.

Very slow indeed has been the realisation amongst UK policymakers that tomorrow's global networks - many already with us today – perform entirely differently to many of the structures and behaviour patterns inherited from the 20th century.

And slowest of all has been appreciation of the vast potential of the modern and transformed Commonwealth network to shape itself round all these new forces, and to prove itself to be, in the prescient words of the late Queen Elizabeth 'the face of the future'¹. Her prescience went further when she spoke of the 'entirely new conception' the modern Commonwealth' was becoming. Entirely new also are the opportunities, benefits, and dangers which the information age has opened up in the Commonwealth space.

¹ Her Majesty The Queen's 2009 Christmas Broadcast



What is more, the new unfolding tableau which is the Commonwealth network today fits precisely with the 'entirely new' pattern of international relations in which the UK is working hard to find a place.

Yet clearly the work on this front is not going very well. The maintenance and invigoration of new networks demands not just occasional splurges of enthusiasm but a steady stream of policy creativity and detailed contact. While other countries, China included, have moved on from analysing and questioning the Commonwealth's existence to exploiting the potential of its network, somehow the UK, which should have been the first to seize the new strategic opportunities, is left at the back of the queue, pondering the purpose of it all and how Britain should react to it.

This geopolitical torpor is what must now be overcome, as Britain feels its way towards a repositioning in a transformed international landscape. The time has obviously come to bring Commonwealth relations back to the centre of British strategy and planning.

*“The time has obviously come to bring
Commonwealth relations back to the centre of
British strategy and planning.”*

Yet there is a strong sense that this is simply not happening. For this to occur would require three big changes not yet apparently planned, except tentatively in some quarters.

First, the UK's most senior shapers of strategy consciously need to bring Commonwealth issues much nearer to the heart of British foreign policy and purpose, and to adapt both policy priorities and implementing machinery accordingly. The deep incursions of both Chinese and Russian influence into many Commonwealth member states makes this an urgent priority on which no more time can be lost.

Second, they need to demonstrate, and explain to the wider public, in telling terms, the growing value and importance of the UK's membership and role in the network, and how that came about.



Third, they need to show, and share full recognition of, the Commonwealth and its value to every one of its other 55 member states - and to do so not spasmodically but constantly, continuously, and constructively.

Many people today feel acutely this lack of purpose and narrative in Britain's world direction. Without national loyalties there is social fragmentation. It a story of national purpose and character told with pride, there is fragmentation of the UK itself. The Commonwealth connection is a story which can engender greater socio-political stability at home *and* vastly greater engagement and influence in the affairs of rising Asia and Africa, to which the Commonwealth is a very obvious gateway.

So, there *is* a new story both to be told, which it at present is not being told, and a new agenda of action to be pursued, which is not being pursued. The Commonwealth story should not be kept in separate box but seen as a central component of British foreign policy, as we find our way forward in the hazardous conditions of a transformed and unfamiliar 21st century.

It is not only Prince Harry and his wife who have failed understand the essence of today's Commonwealth. A whole generation in Westminster and Whitehall has failed to see what was taking place, what is now happening or what is likely to come.

There is no lack of advice, speeches, generalised commentaries on this enormous subject. The missing element is actual policy. Little moves forward in the world of governance without policy.

My hope is that the proposed new Centre will fill this gap, helping with the injection of a continuing stream of ideas and detailed policies into Commonwealth arteries, a demonstrable commitment of this one member to the vitality and health of the whole network.

Like a huge iceberg, the bulk of intra-Commonwealth activity and networking today lies beneath the radar of conventional diplomacy. Experts and opinion-formers accustomed to look only at what goes on



between governments miss completely the new reality. The world is moving outside the familiar interstate system; power and influence now flow between networks, professions, businesses, and political causes regardless of national boundaries on an unprecedented scale.

This is a new kind of globalisation, and it contains both dangers, unless wisely handled and paradoxes, unless wisely understood.

The danger is that increased power in non-state hands can be deployed not only for good purposes but for bad ones as well. The social empowerment which incentivises young people to create and innovate, and which opens up educational opportunities for people at every level, is nothing but good and welcome.

But it is this same power which opens the door to anarchic abuse, to the detriment of stability, to disregard of the rule of law and the perversion of honest democratic governance, indeed of the very word 'democracy'. It is organizations like the Commonwealth, rooted in voluntary association but committed to common values which are ideally suited to effectively ensure that this new globalisation is a tool for good.

“It is organizations like the Commonwealth, rooted in voluntary association but committed to common values which are ideally suited to effectively ensure that this new globalisation is a tool for good.”

Of course, most families have their inner tensions and networks have their problem points. The modern Commonwealth needs enlightened and sophisticated governance to guide it through these shoals. A specially appointed and so-called 'High Level Group' was set up in 2017, charged with adapting the structures of the Commonwealth to entirely new world conditions. Its recommendations were clear, but the crucial momentum needed to implement them was absent. They failed. There was simply no leadership.

Looking at the scene from the selfish British viewpoint it is clear that the modern Commonwealth provides Britain both with the ideal



transmission mechanism for its considerable soft power influence, and with an excellent opportunity to make the contribution to world peace and prosperity to which the better side of the British character has always aspired.

It would be heartening to see the British establishment, having wandered for a biblical forty years or so in search of a European destiny, return successfully to the larger Commonwealth fold, re-forging old links and seeking new ties in a transformed international milieu. Dare the UK's mainstream thinkers, intellectuals, and strategists face the immensity of this change?

Wind back two or three decades and few expected the morning would ever come when Britain would need access to the swelling markets, and swelling capital resources, of key Commonwealth friends, notably the giant and dynamic India. That morning has now arrived.

The Commonwealth today comes in two guises – as an alliance of some of the fastest growing major economies of the age, and as the champion of small states. It is the criss-cross symbiosis between these two groups, all equals around the table, which makes this such an extraordinary entity, and so well fitted to this age.

Nobody planned things to evolve this way. There were no blueprints - on the contrary, many were ready to write off the Commonwealth as a relic of the past. What they did not foresee is that networks have their own agendas and their own capacities to mesh together, without waiting for higher instruction or approval. What they also did not foresee was that the swirl of communications technology would advance this process in a manner never matched before in human history.

Why has this major failure in the British official perception occurred, when so many are beckoning so clearly in a better direction? Why is the obvious opportunity for British exceptionalism in a highly competitive world order not being lauded and promoted ten times more energetically?



The answer to these questions makes the case immediately for establishing a new Centre for Commonwealth Affairs - there is no UK Commonwealth policy, and no institute to create one. The tools to build one up, layer by layer, and to bring together all the ingredients from a dozen areas have not been assembled.

The rest of this paper will seek to answer the puzzle of the missing momentum, and by doing so, help delineate the new agenda and the new policy priorities which should be at the heart of British strategy in the vastly changed international landscape. This must be the new CCA's space.

That word used above, 'exceptionalism', needs to be handled with care because it has been widely misused. It has to be rescued from the ranks of revisionist historians who have seized on it as being fig leaf for loss of imperial status.

Here and now, in the 21st century, it should be interpreted in an entirely different way, not as cover for Empire 2.0 yearnings, which very few may still hold, but as a descriptor of the unique advantages that the UK needs to work at if it is to survive and prosper in an intensely competitive world.

By creating this windmill of the past - that the aspiration to excel and make the best of our national assets is no more than imperial yearning - and then endlessly tilting at it, the anti-Commonwealth galère have done more damage to Britain's future than they may realise. The line-up of professional critics has helped divert attention from the new realities of developing world market power, in Asia and Africa especially, and the new and associated security challenges.

Seemingly distant, it is in practice meeting these challenges – of supply chain disruption, climate disregard, energy insecurity, disease spread, unmanageable migration pressures, drug cartels and much more which ought to have engaged Britain's best brains. These are the issues which have had, and continue to have, by far the greatest direct impact on people's daily lives. The UK should have long ago been constructively involved, contributing to prevention and amelioration far more



effectively than at present. To an effective role in all these areas of danger and opportunity the modern Commonwealth network provides an invaluable gateway.

“History of course plays a part...but the overwhelming power of connectivity now plays a much bigger one.”

The task now should be a supportive one. It should be aimed not just at a still-to-be-convinced Whitehall but at all the generators of British soft power and influence, drawing trends and developments together and setting out an interrelated whole. It is a question of ditching some of the old and most familiar principles of diplomacy and preparing to operate with the tools of a completely different environment.

History of course plays a part as the Commonwealth evolves, but the overwhelming power of connectivity now plays a much bigger one.

The problem for officialdom in keeping up is that the Commonwealth is not a clearly defined zone. The orderly diplomatic mind despairs of the generalisations and looks for the action points, the pinch-points and the common interest points.

But the Commonwealth network is not like that. When the former President Obama was being briefed ahead of a Middle East visit, he was told that everything in the bottomless complexities of the region - all issues, all dangers, all trends – was connected to everything else.

The Commonwealth network, too, has become a silver thread winding through almost every public issue, domestic and international, not a subject to be tucked neatly away in a filing cabinet.

On the home front, issues ranging from social mobility, community stability and immigration, to education and skills, of course to sport and to the cohesion of the UK itself, all have a growing Commonwealth dimension.



That humbler list now has to be elevated to national strategy and direction, to trade expansion, to international partnership and development, to influence and soft power deployment, to all kinds of technical cooperation; above all (because all else depends upon it) to security and military cooperation against new threats and new intrusions.

The problem of comprehension by busy officials and deadline-chasing media is categorisation. The Commonwealth is not treaty-based – membership is entirely voluntary. It is not a trade bloc, nor a defence alliance, not even neatly slotted into the now outdated concepts of ‘East’ and ‘West’ that dominated twentieth century thinking on foreign policy, and still persist in certain quarters on both sides of the Atlantic.

So where is the glue that holds it together? What is the binding force? What motivates new members to join, or apply to join? What, some ask, is the point of it all?

The answer of the last century was that members were like-minded, used the English language for most purposes, subscribed to the principles of various declarations down the years (Harare, Edinburgh, etc.) and liked to maintain full access to the commercial vitality of the Anglophone world.

These common threads still apply, but they have now been strongly reinforced. The two most recently admitted members, Togo and Gabon, have both repeatedly stated the wish to deepen commercial and diplomatic exposure to the Anglophone world of success. Compared with other networks, such as the Francophonie of which these two have been members, they see the Commonwealth system as offering altogether better prospects.

The same arguments can be heard from other countries queuing up or seriously discussing moves in the Commonwealth direction.

The would-be list includes Angola, South Sudan, struggling to emerge from mayhem and Burundi. Then there is little Somaliland, denied country recognition on the spurious grounds that it breaks up already



broken Somalia, but in practical terms fully qualified to join. Other states contemplate the possibility, or at least taking on some form of association. These include Bhutan, Nepal and latterly the highly successful, prosperous, and independence-minded Oman. Zimbabwe also wants to return to the fold but is plainly not ready to do so. Algeria has also shown interest, as, to many people's surprise, has the Republic of Ireland, although much muted since Brexit.

But in the twenty-first century there is both a more powerful binding agent at work than any of these, namely the electronic communications revolution, and a far more urgent motive for sticking together.

Total global, instant and virtually costless contact has given a disparate and apparently fading association a blood transfusion. These are nations, many of them still young, which sense a new power in their hands with which to safeguard their hard-won independence with pride and a greatly enhanced sense of national identity. They are not thrilled about the prospect of being pulled into either the Chinese *or* American sphere of influence. Both leave them uncomfortable.

“The largest grouping of nations are those happy to take what is on offer...but absolutely determined to preserve their independence and far better equipped than in the past to assert and defend it.”

They have been christened the neo-non-aligned, but they are very different from the Bandung 'non-aligned' minority, who in the midst of the Cold War tried to be ideologically neutral. In the present age, by far the largest grouping of nations are those happy to take what is on offer from the super-powers and hegemons but absolutely determined to preserve their independence - and far better equipped than in the past to assert and defend it.

For them the Commonwealth could become a safe harbour – somewhere where there are links to be worked at, friends to be found and reassuring and rewarding relationships to be sustained. The Commonwealth could



begin to be seen as a thoroughly smart club of which to be a member in increasingly precarious world conditions.

New technology takes these relationships deeper, and beyond the scope of governments. Every interest group, every institution at every level of education, every professional discipline, every political cause from across the Commonwealth can now come together in the same on-line arena. These are people and groupings who have probably never met before. They represent interests and like-minded sections of society ready to engage, with their own agendas, often lying outside the reach of governmental officialdom altogether.

This is why it is now imperative for UK Government and savvy officials in every department to widen their vista and see where Departmental objectives can be supplemented, or even, led, by non-governmental creativity and inspiration. This is something which can be done far more swiftly, efficiently and regularly in the digital high connectivity age. Diplomacy itself is being outsourced, with a cats' cradle of second channel contacts developing alongside even the most fraught international relationships.

This could be a fruitful future. But note the word 'could'. For it to take shape the British member of the network has to play a much more vigorous part than has been evident to date.

It is true that after Brexit official minds viewed the Commonwealth connection with new interest and pushed the boat out in planning the April 2018 Heads of Government meeting in London. But there was a false political perception near the roots of this whole endeavour, which predictably aroused suspicions and needed dispersing right at the start - that somehow the UK's Commonwealth connections, side-lined for decades, could be transformed into a *substitute* for trade with European neighbours.

In practice there was never the faintest possibility of this kind of alternative approach. The Commonwealth linkage offered, and continues to offer, an addition to UK trade patterns, to influence and to security in a dangerous world. This was never going to be a substitute



for top quality relations with European neighbours – both bilateral and with the EU Commission in Brussels itself. This should have been made ten times clearer at the outset.

The foot-dragging on this front since the official EU break has been disappointing, even considering the undeniable dilemmas of the Northern Irish Protocol. The opportunity for stronger Asian and African links was there long before Brexit and offers us a better entrée into growing consumer markets which dozy Britain ought to have been pushing to open up regardless of the Brexit event.

This is where the new mindset is called for and where the UK has to be policy-active in a number of key areas.

There has been plenty of time to prepare. Parliament, rather than Government, has definitely been ahead of the game. The March 1996 Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee (The Future Role of the Commonwealth) was a vivid opener of minds – though too few - to the nature of the new Commonwealth.

Here was an association not of troublesome or penurious ex-colonies but an assembly of like-minded nations that had already evolved into embracing some of the fastest growing economies in the world, while constituting an ideal channel for bespoke partnerships with a long chain of smaller island nations still stuck in unacceptable poverty.

“That the whole Commonwealth network has changed radically in character and significance has hardly, until very recently, been noticed.”

These should have long ago been looked at not just vaguely as ‘family’ but as key and practical allies in new world conditions. It is no accident that half the membership of the CPTPP giant trade network, (Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership) which Britain is rightly keen to join, are Commonwealth members.

The problem has been getting Whitehall and Westminster to notice. Too many of our best minds have been wrapped up in the EU saga. That the



whole Commonwealth network has changed radically in character and significance has hardly, until very recently, registered.

We are now, two or three decades into the digital revolution, in a completely different place.

This time there is a whole new dimension to address, and it lies deep in the security priorities of almost every Commonwealth member state. It is this new concern which turns the Commonwealth's global role on its head.

Could it therefore be the right time for Britain, as a member of this growing network, to start thinking towards a resurrection not just of trade agreements but of security arrangements which have to go with them, drawing us closer to the modern and vastly changed network that is the Commonwealth?

The answer must surely be 'yes', but the question appears not even to be on the official UK policy agenda. Elsewhere it certainly is – in Canada, for example, in Australia, in Singapore, in Malaysia, in several African states. Surely it is time it was moved onto the action list here.

Without much Ministerial support from Government, the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, under the determined leadership of Lord Marland, has created a forum in which these ideas are being mooted. Nothing imperial or nostalgic about it, with the UK regarded very much as a network partner, not some patronising hub at the centre of Commonwealth spokes – in short, a new ensemble of connected nations and peoples, with new motives and new concerns.

It is not just that trade patterns have altered out of recognition, with the value of global trade from services now outstripping that from goods, and intra-Commonwealth trade leaving the old dominant pattern of primary product exports far behind. Above and beyond all economic considerations, the security dimension has swollen dramatically in significance.



A widely-held view in London policy circles has long been that the Commonwealth was not only a marginal aspect of British overseas interests, probably destined to shrink further under the new monarch, but that the numerous island states were anyway too remote to have any strategic value. They were at best unimportant, at worst an occasional humanitarian challenge, but in no sense an asset.

This is not at all the way China sees things. Nor does Russia. Through Chinese eyes the island states, whether of the Pacific or the Caribbean, have very clear strategic value –through their proximity to key maritime trade routes, their opportunities as bases for drone activity and for rival GPS developments to Western systems.

“The worldwide consultants Dezan Shira & Associates estimate that the total value of China’s BRI projects is now \$4 trillion.”

Hence an emerging pattern of Chinese engagement in, for example, the Solomon Isles, in Vanuatu, in Tuvalu, in Fiji, or, over in the Caribbean in Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua, Trinidad. Hence, not only the infrastructure loans, the budget support, the technical assistance, but also the outright involvement in weaponry, in military support through training places, policing methods and other accoutrements of governance.

The African continent, home of twenty-one Commonwealth member states, now lives with thousands of Chinese military personnel. To a lesser extent, Russia, through entities such as the sinister Wagner Group, also makes its global presence known.

The worldwide consultants Dezan Shira & Associates estimate that the total value of China’s BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) projects is now \$4 trillion (£3.3 trillion).²

² China Belt And Road Projects Value Now Exceeds US\$4 Trillion - Silk Road Briefing, Sept 2021



This creeping planet-wide Chinese encroachment has passed across the agenda both of the Biden administration and of the assembled G7. From the seven countries' most recent deliberations, (June 2022), with four more in attendance by invitation (India, South Korea, South Africa, Singapore), came the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment plan.

This was a relaunch of President Biden's 'Build Back Better World' 2017 idea, a response to earlier apprehensions about BRI, which had failed to take off.

“The burgeoning Commonwealth network could serve as an obvious starting point in challenging the BRI advance.”

If the powers attending had asked why, they might have seen another way forward. The clear alternative is to underpin trade and investment proposals with a degree of existing organizational and diplomatic coherence - in short, with bodies almost exactly like the Commonwealth.

Most Commonwealth countries, given even a hint of balanced and wise policy encouragement from the UK, would have taken a more sober and realistic view of the problem. There was no reason to suppose that most members of the Commonwealth network would have aligned themselves with either ideological Sinophobia on the one hand, or with the seductions of China's BRI on the other. The fate of countries that fall for Chinese blandishments had been made clear, recently and vividly, by Sri Lanka's unhappy situation.

But none of this happened because none of it was offered. Had the G7 members been more careful readers of Sun Tzu, who showed so clearly that the cleverest way to defeat the enemy was to do so without fighting, things on this front might have gone quite differently.



Summary and Conclusions

Today's Commonwealth ('an entirely new conception') meshes closely with the new international context in which the UK is working hard to find its new post-Brexit place. The voluntary, non-treaty character of the Commonwealth network accords with strong aspirations for national independence in the digital age.

“The voluntary, non-treaty character of the Commonwealth networks accords with strong aspirations for national independence in the digital age.”

The work is not going well and the role of the UK in this enormous network needs to be brought much nearer to the heart of British foreign policy.

From the British viewpoint the modern Commonwealth has evolved from a liability into a series of major trading, investment and market opportunities, as well as an ideally tailored transmission channel for the projection of British soft power. But increasingly, it is also emerging as a vital part of the UK's safety and security.

Chinese activity in particular, but also Russian, threatens to undermine this aspect of the Commonwealth scene.

A new framework for defence and military cooperation, and for handling all other aspects of modern military technology, should be devised, and put forward for Commonwealth leaders to consider. Longstanding successes in defence cooperation, such as the Five Power Defence Arrangements, should be built upon and widened.

More and more independent states are looking for non-aligned positions out of reach of both Chinese and American spheres. The Commonwealth could well become, and is already widely seen as, a potential safe haven for this large group of the 'neo-non-aligned'. It



could well provide the best response to Chinese BRI encroachment across the world if given the chance.

The lesson is that this prospect will only come to be if the UK is clearly seen to change course and adjust some of its relationship priorities

The UK has to shed convincingly its persistent image as a mouthpiece of American foreign policy. While fully committed to liberal values and the rule of law, its stance above the Manichean East-West ideological struggles of the 20th century, and its own independence from more globally polarised American schools of thought, has to become clearer and more evident.

At the same time, the lingering claims of Commonwealth sceptics and opponents that the exceptionalism it seeks is merely a cover for restored imperialist longings have to be decisively expunged.

Societies throughout the Commonwealth have changed in structure and character, necessitating an equal and opposite change in the way they are supported by both development resources and security assistance. A greater pooling of resources and projects among the Commonwealth's main donors would reduce duplicating waste and improve impact.

The clear gap in UK-Commonwealth relations is an active and creative policy process, behind which popular momentum can be gathered. The setting up of the Centre for Commonwealth Affairs is in direct response to this dangerous lacuna.

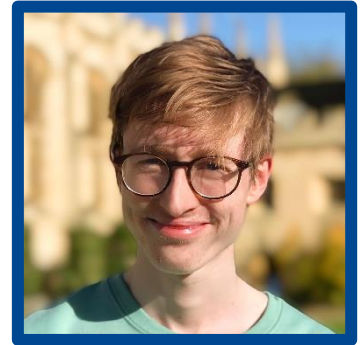


About the Authors



Sam Bidwell is a Parliamentary Researcher, and Director of the Centre for Commonwealth Affairs. He is a graduate of the University of Cambridge, where he specialised in constitutional, administrative, and international law. He is the Centre's research lead, and in his spare time, a keen cricket fan.

Jonathan Heywood is the Associate Director of the Centre for Commonwealth Affairs and Secretary of Labour Students, the Labour Party's student organisation. He specialises in intellectual history at Cambridge. In his free time, he enjoys wine tasting and is a long-suffering Manchester United fan.



Lord Howell of Guildford is one of Britain's longest standing advocates for closer Commonwealth relations. First made a Government minister in 1970, his career in Parliament spans over fifty years, including ministerial service under three Prime Ministers. He has written extensively on a number of topics including foreign policy and energy, including 2018's *The Mother of All Networks*, offering a timely account of the role that the Commonwealth can play in the 21st century.

You can find out more information about the Centre for Commonwealth Affairs at commonwealthaffairs.co.uk, or follow us on Twitter at [@commonwealthcca](https://twitter.com/commonwealthcca)

Please direct enquiries to director@commonwealthaffairs.co.uk

“The Commonwealth bears no resemblance to the empires of the past. It is an entirely new conception built on the highest qualities of the spirit of humankind: friendship, loyalty, and the desire for freedom and peace.”

The Late Queen Elizabeth II

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