

## Written evidence submitted by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (INR0024)

### Summary:

- Persistent shortcomings of the Commonwealth as an effective multi-lateral organisation, and ‘springboard’ for British foreign policy
- Residual strength of Commonwealth civil society organisations, and levers of ‘soft power’ influence
- Identified areas of strategic reconfiguration of the Commonwealth inter-governmental organisation, and the need of future British realism in the place of the Commonwealth in British foreign policy

### Introduction:

The Institute of Commonwealth Studies, founded in 1949, is the only postgraduate academic institution in the United Kingdom devoted to the study of the Commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> The Institute is a national and international centre of excellence for policy-relevant research, research facilitation and teaching. As a member of the School of Advanced Study established in 1994, the Institute works with eight other prestigious postgraduate research institutes to offer academic opportunities across and between a wide range of subject fields in the humanities and social sciences. The ICWS offers a number of postgraduate study programmes, including the longest-running interdisciplinary and practice-oriented human rights MA programme offered by residential and distance learning.<sup>2</sup> The Institute also offers residential and e-distance research degrees, and provides research training. It also hosts public lectures, workshops and conferences on a wide range of historical and contemporary Commonwealth related issues. The Institute is the administrative home of the [Human Rights Consortium](#) and [Refugee Law Initiative](#).

This report was prepared by Dr Sue Onslow, Deputy Director of the ICWS, in consultation with Professor Philip Murphy, Director of the Institute. Professor Murphy has published extensively on the modern Commonwealth (most recently, *The Empire’s New Clothes: The Myth of the Commonwealth*, Hurst 2018), and Dr Sue Onslow was the lead interviewer on the ICWS’ major oral history project, ‘An Oral History of the Modern Commonwealth 1965-2012’ (comprising 77 extended interviews with Commonwealth heads of government, politicians, four former Secretary Generals and members of the Commonwealth Secretariat, as well as leaders of civil society organisations. These are available at [www.commonwealthoralhistories.org](http://www.commonwealthoralhistories.org) ).

This summary represents Onslow’s and Murphy’s analysis of the current structural and procedural impediments inherent in the Commonwealth as a post-colonial, highly diverse multilateral organisation of 54 member states, and consequent continuing strategic challenges to the UK government if it seeks to use the Commonwealth as a platform for the projection of future British foreign policy goals.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://commonwealth.sas.ac.uk/about-us>

<sup>2</sup> <https://hrc.sas.ac.uk/graduate-study/ma-understanding-and-securing-human-rights>

## **Factual Information:**

Very little has changed in terms of the potential of the modern Commonwealth and its persistent shortcomings since the preparation of the Foreign Affairs Committee Report on the role and future of the Commonwealth in 2012.<sup>3</sup> There was renewed hope in the future of the organisation engendered by the 2015 Commonwealth heads' meeting in Valetta, the election of a new Secretary General, Baroness Patricia Scotland, and another round of restructuring and reform of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The renewed engagement of the British Government evident in the 2018 London summit and substantial British financial contributions to Commonwealth projects and bilateral programmes in Commonwealth countries, has been accompanied by rhetoric around the post-BREXIT possibilities for increased Commonwealth trade and investment. However, there continues to be a decline of broad political commitment at heads' level and effective delivery of the Commonwealth in a number of key areas. This is compounded by the progressive erosion of popular understanding of the Commonwealth as a collaborative 'entity', although this varies widely across societies in member nations. There is a range of opinion across Commonwealth countries which may be characterized as spanning Commonwealth 'realism' and Commonwealth 'idealism'. Commonwealth 'realism' recognises the declining value of the Commonwealth as a post-colonial institution supporting developmental states in transition: this is in contrast to far greater funding support provided by international institutions, the growth of regional organisations which meet more often and reflect shared outlooks and interests; and, despite the rhetoric of the Commonwealth as small states' organisation, the limited usage of this platform by those small states themselves. Commonwealth 'idealism' stresses its potential as an antidote to single issue identity politics and organisation, emphasising enduring communalities of culture, sport, language and legal systems.

**In 2012, the Foreign Affairs Committee Report noted the following concerns (marked in red in the following text. Onslow and Murphy's analysis is marked in black):**

*1. The moral authority of the Commonwealth has too often been undermined by the repressive actions of member governments.*

This remains an acute concern among the minority of Commonwealth governments with mature functioning democracies and Commonwealth civil society organisations. These authoritarian trends, aggravated by populist nationalism and further enabled by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, are global phenomena and pose a direct challenge to liberal values embedded within the declared aspirations of the Commonwealth. For too long, the Commonwealth rested on the moral authority of its part in the global anti-apartheid struggle, and South Africa's transition to black majority rule in 1994. The drive to redefine its purpose and identity around governance and strengthening democratic institutions in the 1990s has stalled, with renewed and repeated calls for the Commonwealth to match its rhetoric with tangible achievements. Although there have been individual country advances around independence of the judiciary and the importance of legal frameworks against

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<sup>3</sup> Fourth Report of Session 2012-2013, the Role and Future of the Commonwealth, 14 November 2012. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/foreign-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/the-role-and-future-of-the-commonwealth/>

electoral fraud, the majority of Commonwealth countries continue to criminalize homosexuality. As another example, the Commonwealth's track record on freedom of expression and the media is concerning.<sup>4</sup> This is not simply a North/South issue.<sup>5</sup> The complexity and extent of the systemic crisis precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic poses an existential challenge to the cohesion of the Commonwealth since its claims of effective global networks risk breaking down under the dual onslaught of a public health crisis, and wider abrupt descent into global economic recession. The focussed and coordinated international action on climate change, a moral cause promoted by the Commonwealth since 1985 and particularly since the 2015 and 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, is also vulnerable to domestic appeals of economic nationalism and re-assertion of vested interests of fossil fuels as Commonwealth governments seek to reinvigorate their economies.

*2. We were disturbed to note the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms for upholding the Commonwealth's values. We support the Eminent Persons Group's proposal for a Commonwealth Charter.*

As a self-declared values-based association, Commonwealth governments as a collective continue to fall short of the aspirations set out in its 2013 Charter, most notably in the field of sustained progress of democratic institutions, gender equality and LGBT rights, and freedom of expression and the media. Despite agreement at the 2011 Perth CHOGM that the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG)'s remit should be 'sharpened' with more effective powers to sanction transgressions by Commonwealth governments, this has not been implemented. Commonwealth processes of discrete consultation and consensus continue to run directly counter to CSO pressure for greater transparency and accountability; furthermore, the composition of CMAG and its methods of working can compromise effective decisive action. As a recent example: there has been frustratingly slow consideration of a coordinated initiative among leading Commonwealth civil society organisations, the Commonwealth Principles on freedom of expression and the role of media in good governance,<sup>6</sup> designed expressly to be used by CMAG as one of its benchmarks of adherence to the values of the Charter. Since the launch of these principles in 2018 (praised by the Secretary General herself and commended by the UK's special envoy for media freedom, Amal Clooney), progress been hindered by the overly cautious and strictly hierarchical culture of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

*3. We conclude that continuing evidence of serious human rights abuses in Sri Lanka shows that the Commonwealth's decision to hold the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo was wrong.*

The decision to hold the 2020 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kigale was similarly mistaken and indicated the lack of due care and attention by heads to the

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<sup>4</sup> World Press Freedom Index, 2020, Reporters Without Borders <https://rsf.org/en/ranking#>

<sup>5</sup> Akbar Khan, Former Secretary General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (2015-2019), quoted in Philip Murphy, How Serious is the Commonwealth about Press Freedom? Talking Humanities, <https://talkinghumanities.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2020/01/23/how-serious-is-the-commonwealth-about-press-freedom/>

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<https://commonwealth.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Publications/Commonwealth%20principles%20on%20freedom%20of%20expression%20and%20the%20role%20of%20the%20media%20in%20good%20governance.pdf>

reputational damage to the Commonwealth.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly regrettable as there had been concerted efforts to row back from the reputational fall out caused the disastrous choice of Colombo in 2013, and to revive and reform the Commonwealth at the 2015 Valetta meeting under the leadership of a new Secretary General. As the host of the 2018 Commonwealth summit and incoming chair in office, the British government had a particular opportunity to point out the inadvisability of Rwanda as the 2020 host and to prevent this choice. Reports had already appeared in the British mainstream press and human rights organisations' websites of attacks on dissident Rwandan exiles, extra-judicial murders, and the targeting of domestic critical journalism under the umbrella of domestic security legislation. Furthermore, the protracted delay on the decision to postpone the 2020 Kigale Commonwealth Heads meeting highlighted the institutional weaknesses of the Commonwealth as an effective multi-lateral organisation in terms of public diplomacy and perception.

*4. The Commonwealth has appeared less active and less publicly visible in recent years and there is evidence that it is missing opportunities to influence events.*

'Missing opportunities to influence events' is a perennial complaint against the Commonwealth. Although the inter-governmental Commonwealth Secretariat has been more visible and active on mainstream and social media under Secretary General Baroness Patricia Scotland, much of its activity is presentational rather than substantive. Despite its recent restructuring, as an intergovernmental organisation the Secretariat has failed to find a signature issue where it can publicly make a genuine difference in contemporary international affairs; indeed, the bureaucracy appears to be caught in a spiral of decline and low morale, in which major donors such as the Australian, British and Canadian governments see it as an ineffectual actor and have been reluctant to award it significant funding. The Secretariat therefore has struggled to prove its worth against the backdrop of significantly diminishing budgets. There are silos of important research within the Secretariat – such as the Countering Violent Extremism section, advice on debt management or developmental aid policy – but by its very nature, advice to member governments remains discreet, rather than in the public domain. Similarly, admirable work on election observation has been hampered by limited funding and staff levels, as the Commonwealth's work in this area has been eclipsed by larger and wealthier international election monitoring organisations.

In part, the Commonwealth's lack of public visibility is also the direct consequence of enduring inflated expectations of the association's capacity to deliver, as well as the international and domestic UK media landscape. The Commonwealth continues to be largely ignored or misunderstood by the British domestic press and wider public opinion, except when there is a royal angle to the story. For example, during the London 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting the British press was devoted most attention to the future of the headship – indeed, the 2018 CHOGM was criticised in the overseas Commonwealth press for its overwhelmingly royal branding – rather than the announcement of a global campaign against marine plastic pollution or Commonwealth trade deals and investment. Similarly, British media reports on Commonwealth Day in March 2020 were preoccupied by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex' disengagement from

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bourne, *The Round Table*, 15 February 2019

<https://www.commonwealthroundtable.co.uk/commonwealth/africa/rwanda/rwanda-and-chogm-2020/>

royal duties. Sustained Commonwealth research and coordination around countering violent extremism, the work of Commonwealth youth ambassadors for peace, considered debates around British responsibility for reparations to address legacies of slavery in Commonwealth Caribbean nations, Commonwealth election observation and capacity building, don't sell newspapers. Media ignorance and wilful concentration on high-profile manufactured events remain important impediments to understanding the residual influence of the Commonwealth [particularly its professional and civil society organisations] and the areas of genuine benefit and good will. With the continued passage of time since independence, the original importance of the inter-governmental Commonwealth as a valued opportunity for informal summitry among a small group of heads will diminish even further as time allotted to summits is condensed, and the pressure of other international meetings pushes decision making to officials.

*5. The Commonwealth Secretariat must sharpen, strengthen and promote its diplomatic performance. It is now nearly a year since the acceptance of many Eminent Persons Group recommendations at the 2011 CHOGM. The lengthy period of consultation and discussion over the EPG since October 2011 must not cause a loss of momentum in the process of implementing those recommendations.*

The appetite and energy for reforming the Commonwealth at inter-governmental level has been a consistent feature of this association since the late 1980s. However, periodic restructuring the Secretariat as its international bureaucracy has been followed by renewed calls for further reform. Strategic reconfiguration of the Secretariat since April 2016 has produced (on paper) a leaner and more focussed organisation, although there have been grave reports of accounting inconsistencies and failings of adherence to due process, on top of overall low staff morale. Persistent arrears and non-payment of support costs by member governments were compounded by the British, Canadian and Australian governments' decisions to withhold funding for the Secretariat in February 2020. The perceived diplomatic performance of the Secretariat has also been hampered by critical press reports of the current Secretary General.

*6. We are not convinced that member states are making the most of the economic and trading opportunities offered by the Commonwealth.*

The revival of regular meetings of Commonwealth Trade Ministers is laudable, and individual member states offer the potential for inward British investment and trade deals. However, the Commonwealth does not offer an alternative free trade bloc to the European Union. The statistics of a claimed 19% advantage stemming from shared institutions and language for inter-Commonwealth trade are very questionable.<sup>8</sup> Britain's withdrawal from the EU poses difficult and potentially painful readjustments for a number of Commonwealth members of the Africa-Pacific-Community (APC).

*7. Part of the funding for Commonwealth Scholarships now comes from institutions of higher education. We are concerned that this could develop into an unsustainable burden on the limited funds available to those institutions. We recommend therefore that, recognising the importance of the Scholarships for the achievement of the UK's objectives, the Government should guarantee to maintain at least the current level of funding in real terms.*

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<sup>8</sup> The Rt Hon Sir Vince Cable, The Institute of Commonwealth Studies Annual Peter Lyon Lecture, September 2018.

Given the perceived importance and status of scholarships to study at UK institutions, we recommend a dramatic extension of provision of Commonwealth Scholarships; furthermore, we recommend that Chevening scholarships to Commonwealth countries should be rebranded as Commonwealth scholarships. Future changes to immigration and visa arrangements from Commonwealth citizens should be coordinated with the Department of Education.

*8. The UK Government as a whole does not appear to have a clear and co-ordinated strategy for its relations with the Commonwealth.*

The crux of the problem remains the Commonwealth is a non-treaty organisation, with a wide variety of members in terms of geographic distribution, size, economic capacity and range of developmental need. It is inherently challenging to develop a coordinated strategy that will span small island states, and large populous nations facing radical Islamist insurgencies and transnational terror networks. Therefore, HMG's strategy should remain flexible, quickly responsive, but attentive to enduring sensitivities to any semblance of British dictation within this post-imperial organisation. British policy has been at its most effective when 'leading from behind', through avenues and processes of consultation and information sharing. (For example, British coordinated leadership with other major Commonwealth powers on the heavily indebted poor countries/multilateral debt relief initiative, and climate change leading up to COP21). However, the Commonwealth as an institution will remain less than the sum of its parts, and this needs to be recognised at policy level.

*9. The several Government departments with an interest in Commonwealth matters should work together to develop a strategy for engagement with the Commonwealth, aimed at ensuring that the UK makes the most of the opportunities presented by the Commonwealth.*

This remains as unlikely as it was in 2012 as ignorance of the Commonwealth extends widely across Whitehall. This includes within the FCO, despite the efforts of the Diplomatic Academy which now offers an e-distance module on the modern Commonwealth, and the increase in staffing in the Multilateral Organisations team, under the leadership of the current Commonwealth Envoy, Philip Parham. This can only be addressed at a broader educational level with the modification of the school curriculum to include honest reassessment of Britain's imperial past, recognition of the contribution of migration from the Commonwealth to Britain's post-war reconstruction and changing social attitudes, and the emergence of the Commonwealth as a distinct post-colonial institution. Despite repeated calls for modification of the curriculum, the demands of 'decolonising the academy' across UK universities and efforts of the Royal Commonwealth Society<sup>9</sup>, progress to date remains very slow.

**Recommendations:**

The value of the Commonwealth rests primarily on its transnational network of professional and civil society organisations which are relatively impervious to British strategic direction. However, there are a number of possibilities of addressing its current deficiencies through

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<sup>9</sup> Saved by the Bell, joint report by Commonwealth Exchange and the Royal Commonwealth Society, <http://www.commonwealth-exchange.org/saved-by-the-bell>

reconfiguration of the Commonwealth, which would benefit British foreign policy goals and soft power reach:

- i) Appointment of the Secretary General as the Commonwealth's Human Rights Commissioner, with a small designated staff to support assessment and monitoring, in liaison with other human rights agencies and supported by an external team of Commonwealth envoys and Panel of Elders;<sup>10</sup>
- ii) Return of the Secretariat to its original function as an international bureaucracy with conference organisation responsibilities. This would involve substantial reduction in British funding for the Secretariat. UK financial contributions, together with funding from other Commonwealth governments, should be channelled to:
  - i. a small number of subject specific professional Commonwealth organisations which have the networks and capacity to put pressure on Commonwealth governments over observance of the rights and values set out in the Charter, as an effective means of 'soft power'. These include the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association, the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, Commonwealth Journalists Association, Commonwealth Local Government Association.
  - ii. a fund administered by the Commonwealth Foundation, to which other Commonwealth CSOs (working in the field of youth, gender, health, climate change) can apply;
- iii) Reconfiguration of membership of the Commonwealth, reducing it to those who actively adhere to the values of the Commonwealth Charter, reinforced by CMAG sanctions against transgressor governments (ie a club where the rules apply and are enforced);
- iv) Clear guidelines on the selection of Commonwealth of Government meeting locations, beyond mere willingness to host such meetings. Agreed shared responsibility of costs for hosting such an event would widen the pool of possible hosts.
- v) Re-engagement, utilizing technology to provide regular virtual meetings in between formal biennial heads of government meetings, and triennial ministerial conferences.

It is highly debatable whether HMG has the political will and leverage to push through such a dramatic revision of the size, structure and purpose of the Commonwealth, as smaller Commonwealth countries value membership of this soft-power organisation as a kite-mark of international respectability and engagement.

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<sup>10</sup> The end of the current SG's second term of office (2024) offers the chance to reconfigure both the role of the Secretary General and the Secretariat.

**May 2020**