

## **Written evidence submitted by the Royal Commonwealth Society (ISD0007)**

- Purpose: The proposed review is long overdue. The need for such a review has been evident from long before Brexit and originates from the radically changed international scene and the redistribution of world power and influence which has taken place in the last three decades.
- This is manifested by the substantial shift in both resource output (GDP) AND technologically and innovative capability from the West to Asia, and this in turn is largely rooted in the universal communications revolution and the overwhelming presence of advanced digital technology in all aspects of international affairs (as well, of course, as domestic governance and social conditions).
- All aspects of national security have already been heavily altered by the new conditions – ranging from the identification and nature of threats. The structure and organization of alliances to the procurement of equipment and the role of personnel.
- The review must be holistic and take account the full range of technological and social change that has already occurred, and ALL aspects of governance affected.
- We now live in a world not of spheres of influence or divided civilisations but of networks, where relationships are entirely different and more intricate and complex than ever before in history.
- The Commonwealth network is one of the world's largest – and almost by the most sited to the demands of the digital age. The Commonwealth network today is very different form the Commonwealth as set up 1949, and from the Commonwealth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well.

### **Commonwealth engagement, British global defence, security and commercial policies and the Royal Commonwealth Society.**

Britain's membership of the fifty-four nation network of nations which comprise the Commonwealth has a three-fold relevance to the forthcoming Integrated Review of Britain's defence, security, foreign policy and development policy.

- The Commonwealth Network today, with its very high degree of connectivity at all levels of activity and interchange, offers Britain:
  - a) a unique, highly advantageous and fast expanding range of opportunities for furthering its soft power deployment and its commercial interests;
  - b) a strong transmission mechanism for the shared upholding of values, such as human rights and democracy, protecting the environment, respect for minorities and the disadvantaged and upholding the rule of law and overall social and political stability.

- c) An emerging role of coordination on all security and defence matters, particularly in relation to the new defence ‘frontiers’ of AI, drone technology, cyberspace and the extreme vulnerabilities of society and the economy in the digital age.
- The Commonwealth by its character and structure, comprises both a number of fast-growing states with advanced high-tech capabilities and expanding consumer markets, and a larger number of mid-size and smaller states (including many small island states), which face multiple challenges and disadvantages. The diverse Commonwealth network offers a web of uniquely suitable connections through which Britain can foster and deepen democratic methods and meet with precision the very varied humanitarian needs and development goals of these states and communities.
- Deep British engagement with Commonwealth nations is popular at a national level, not least because of the wholehearted commitment of the British monarchy. At a time when Britain’s global position is being re-appraised, a reaffirmed Commonwealth commitment offers a much needed national purpose and a unifying sense of direction. **The outcome of this review – and the analysis behind it - should be very widely communicated and explained, and shared, of course, in full with Parliament.**

*The Royal Commonwealth Society believes that these considerations earn the modern Commonwealth network a central place in any assessment of Britain’s role in the transformed world conditions that have now come about. The Royal Commonwealth Society’s own goals, programmes and range of activities reflect and support this view of a radically changing international order and gives the Society a close insight into all aspects of the evolving Commonwealth scene.*

The text below elaborates on the points above and explains the relevance of the work of RCS to the many aspects of this evolving 21<sup>st</sup> century Commonwealth network.

## **1. Markets, values and furthering British interests in the modern era: the Commonwealth dimension.**

The old picture of the Commonwealth as a fading, nostalgia-ridden institution has long since crumbled under the impact of new realities. The proof of that probably comes more eloquently from the emerging figures of trade and economic performance, as will be shown, than from any sentiments, eulogies or futurology.

- a) Not allowing for any Covid-19 impact, and looking at the medium-term, GDP growth is currently expected to be 7.2 per cent over the next five years for the whole Commonwealth (higher still in the major Asian economies), against slow growth in advanced economies. What has galvanised the pattern of transactions recently is the rise of instant and continuous communication, allowing an ease and intimacy across peoples and communities which no other international network can possibly emulate, into fast growing emerging economies which are becoming middle class for the first time.

- b) The new twenty-first-century areas of growth and dynamism, the new sources of influence, wealth and trade, and the new consumer markets, now lie *outside* the EU and outside the North Atlantic sphere (with the exception of Canada, now becoming a major energy power). Good access to these new markets and groupings is essential.
- c) The Commonwealth network is one of several potentially advantageous routes into the new growth markets and high technology zones of Asia (Pacific, South-East, Central and Near), and increasingly of Africa as well.
- d) Services are the new growth area in international trade. They now make up more than a quarter of all trade receipts. McKinsey suggests that more than half the wealth generated by international trade comes from services and various forms of data transmission.<sup>i</sup> All the trends point to much more expansion of trade in this form, especially with the growth of digital fabrication.
- e) It is good that the British Government is aiming for a new global services trade framework because the services aspect of the European single market has yielded very slim pickings over the years. Trust is the key ingredient when it comes to trade in services, data and knowledge products. That comes from a common understanding of values that underpin the norms and standards which govern trade in services. This is where the Commonwealth has an advantage as these nations share a common legal and institutional framework, which is further bolstered by trust through non-governmental organisations such as the Royal Commonwealth Society. *RCS programmes are designed to provide the trust and fellowship foundations between all Commonwealth countries on which trade relations are built.*
- f) So, while world free trade is a powerful force for good (and, indeed, the key means nowadays of upholding a rules-based order), the key ingredient is trust and its supporting pillars of common language, common values, standards and above all, respect for the rule of law, underpinned by close affinities and feelings of fair dealings, friendship and cultural and educational exchange- exactly what the Commonwealth network delivers.
- g) The Commonwealth has emerged in the digital age in a way that is organic rather than governmental. It is increasingly woven together not so much by governmental linkages and directives but by professions, civil society and interest networks of incredible density and power, all needing the support of, but *outside*, the governmental structure and process.
- h) Examples are the networks of youth (such as those managed by the RCS), as well as scientists, schools and universities, creative industries, parliamentarians, doctors, financiers, farming reformers, veterinary experts, engineers, architects, environmentalists, games and athletics groups, women's groups of all kinds and all ages, energy and climate specialists, judges, lawyers, small businesses, insurers, architects, sight-savers, journalists, ecologists – the list goes on and on. *These are the skills and binding forces which underpin good relations, generate trust and attract and protect capital investment, from which trade follows.*

- i) Networks allow the opening of links for the United Kingdom through the Commonwealth to the great trading groups in Southeast Asia, such as the ASEAN Economic Community of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the emerging trading groups around the Indian Ocean, the entirely new networks and clusters forming in Central Asia, in Africa and in Latin America, the Pacific Alliance, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership,<sup>ii</sup> and to the second iteration of the former North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).
- j) These are bound to expand with the Belt and Road Initiative and the tying up of Chinese, Central Asian and European markets as never before in history. And, of course, all this has to move forward with the necessary infrastructure of finance, trade facilitation, insurance, and so on.
- k) Finally, as defence and security come to depend increasingly on cyber systems, on drone and maritime technology and on detailed intelligence, a clear role emerges for closer security and defence cooperation between Commonwealth member states. A cyber security dialogue has already emerged between Britain and South Asian states and projects for both military, maritime and air defences have been mooted.

**In sum, Britain's security, modern defences, foreign policy interests and prosperity are now closely bound with Commonwealth engagement at all levels. The strengthening of all three areas should be a strategic national priority.**

## **2. Enhancing Britain's contribution to global development, stability and prosperity via Commonwealth engagement.**

The Commonwealth offers a raft of opportunity and influence, where smaller states' voices get a bigger hearing, and the problems of those states receiving genuine attention and consideration, notably in meeting the severe challenges of climate change, energy scarcity, food and water needs, and other escape routes from poverty.

It gives Britain yet another chance to recover its once strong reputation for helping the smaller and weaker states of the planet, to be a source of supportive partnership, free of suggestions of dominance, exploitation or control. At least potentially, the Commonwealth is thus emerging as the kind of forum in which richer and faster-growing countries and the poorer and smaller nations can speak on equal terms, in which people from different faiths can sit down and discuss their problems calmly (RCS organises the largest annual multi-faith service in the UK on Commonwealth Day at Westminster Abbey), and in which almost all members are seriously committed – or under steady pressure to be committed – to good governance and to contributing to global peace and stability.

The hub-and-spoke Commonwealth model of the past typically put Britain at the centre of a wheel with lines extending out to all our Commonwealth partners, now fifty-four in number (with more lining up to join or associate). This model is no longer relevant.

The modern network-and-cluster concept is quite different. Instead of links from a central 'hub' to the various points on the rim, there emerges an intricate and living network of linkages without any particular centre. In the case of the Commonwealth, this currently means not fifty-four connections but 1,326 individual connections – a very different story.

The Commonwealth's network characteristics make it especially suitable for focusing in the most practical ways on the specific environmental problems and fears of the many small island and coastal states who are part of the 'club' or 'family'. While climate issues are certainly being

addressed (if not all that successfully) at global level, via the UN, COP26, etc., the vastly varied and detailed needs of different smaller states tend to get lost in the generalities and preoccupations with the big offender nations. This makes the Commonwealth the preferable forum in which to shape responses to the precise needs of the long chain of small island states round the world and the coastal ocean states of Africa, who happen to be part of the network. Protecting the environment has long been one of the areas of work of the RCS.

As services and digital trade are the new growth area in international trade, this benefits the UK which is overwhelmingly a services economy (83 per cent of GDP is the latest 2019 figure).

So, while world free trade is a powerful force for good (and, indeed, the key is upholding a rules-based order), the key ingredient is trust and its supporting pillars of common language, common values, human and human and minority rights, and above all, respect for the rule of law, underpinned by close affinities and feelings of fair dealings, friendship and cultural and educational exchange - exactly what the Commonwealth system delivers.

Nowadays this is soft power. Soft power is delivered not just via the state but predominately through non-governmental organisations that foster links at the community-level. Through the RCS's over 60 branches across the Commonwealth and our extensive network of youth leaders, we are in a trusted and central position within the non-governmental organisation space to enhance the soft power of the Commonwealth.

### **3. Re-defining and popularising Britain's global (both commercial and security-oriented) and Commonwealth role in a radically altered international order.**

The Commonwealth network is only one of the new trading and business complexes that have emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it is much the biggest, although with light institutions and not bound together by any treaties. Instead, solidarity flows from the standard-setting Charter of Commonwealth Values to which all members must seek to adhere, and toward which Commonwealth membership exerts constant pressure, even though there are clear backsliders.

In redefining Britain's 21<sup>st</sup> century role, we contend that the Commonwealth organization, seen from the British perspective not as a hub, or relic of empire, but as a network injected with vibrant new life by the communications revolution, can play a major part.

We argue that that this new depiction of Britain as still a nation of exceptionalism, and still with a highly distinct role in a changed world can be successfully built up in ways which cement UK solidarity and have equal resonance in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as England.

Departure from the European Union, together with question marks over the US-UK special relationship, have all left the British public with a sense of unease about Britain's new direction.

This has now to be replaced by new relations with Continental Europe, and by new relationship with the USA. But in addition, a strong vision of Britain in a multi-polar world economy is required to provide an appealing and rounded picture of British destiny.

*While, at government level, Commonwealth countries may differ and clash, beneath the media radar, the networking process continues – each new connection sparking fresh initiatives and*

*activity, leading to further contacts with yet further networks beyond. Thus, on a 'friend of a friend' basis, entrée to the twenty-first century global system of networks and institutions truly opens up to us.*

24 March 2020

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<sup>i</sup> McKinsey Global Institute, 'Globalization in Transition: the Future of Trade and Value Chains', January 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Formerly called just the Trans-Pacific Partnership, until America left. Now consisting of Japan, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Peru and New Zealand. Recently, Shinzō Abe, the Japanese Prime Minister, has stated that the UK would be welcomed 'with open arms' to join.

### **General Observation about UK Commonwealth strategy.**

Many Commonwealth countries may well be quizzical about the UK's newfound enthusiasm for working with them, given the sharp downgrading of UK Commonwealth interest in 1972. In now returning to the 'fold,' our policies and approaches must reflect a suitably condign attitude and a clear recognition that this is *not in any way a replay of the old relationships*.

Not only has the Commonwealth of 1949 gone. The Commonwealth of the 20th century has also gone and been replaced by a network of countries which includes some of the world's fastest growing economies and middle-income consumer markets. We need to clear our minds that we are re-engaging with Commonwealth countries not in some kind of post-colonial central role but as key part of the UK's new economic and security strategy in a transformed world – and a key channel through which to exercise our full responsibilities in today's disturbed and uncertain world conditions.

Finally, we believe that the Government's Commonwealth Unit, while now re-located from the Cabinet Office back to the FCO, must continue to have the full authority of the Prime Minister to operate in conjunction with all departments in Whitehall, and have full powers to initiate and administer the policies, programmes and projects outlined above in the national interest.

### **APPENDIX Note: The Royal Commonwealth Society Agenda**

The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) is a network of individuals and organisations committed to improving the lives and prospects of Commonwealth citizens across the world. Through youth empowerment, education and high-level advocacy, the RCS champions literacy, equality, the environment, and connected communities across the Commonwealth's 54 member nations. The RCS has branches in over 60 Commonwealth and associated countries as well as hosts a network of over

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1,400 Associate Fellows who are young leaders across the nations of the Commonwealth.

The Society's unique position within the Commonwealth family allows it to play a pivotal role in convening and connecting governments, civil society, academic and business leaders, on a wide range of issues. Founded in 1868, the Society is the oldest civil society organisation dedicated to the Commonwealth and is privileged to have Her Majesty The Queen as Patron and Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cornwall as Vice Patron.

The RCS serves as the Secretariat as several key Commonwealth organisations, including the APPG on the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Youth and Gender Equality Network, which is recognised at the UN and Commonwealth-level as the leading voice for youth leadership on gender equality issues.

The RCS is non-partisan, independent of governments and relies on grants and donations to achieve its mission.