



PERSPECTIVE

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The Commonwealth and the UK: a new foreign policy appropriate to the 21st century

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SUMMARY

- Britain badly needs a new foreign policy appropriate to the 21st century. Our interests are not being protected and promoted as they should be. Nor is our contribution to global peace, stability and prosperity as effective as it could or should be.
- The choice for Britain is often said to be between Europe and the US. Deeper reflection suggests that things are not so simple. It is the Commonwealth – potentially *a global network* of power, ideally suited for the 21st century – which is the neglected escape route from this bogus antithesis.
- The US is by far the biggest and most powerful military power. It is also the world's dominant, most successful and dynamic economy.
- However, for all its size and power, the US cannot manage its affairs without friends.
- These friends, if they are true ones, should not be compliant but restraining and constructively critical. Power corrupts. More than ever, the US needs a friendly and respected peer group to keep it on track.
- The EU cannot fulfil this role. It is anti-American. Washington may make polite noises about partnership with Europe, but why should it listen to people it knows to be fundamentally hostile? Even if European views were united on the main global issues (which they are not), the EU carries little real weight with US policymakers.
- China cannot fulfil this role either. China wants to rival the US and be the dominant power in Asia. It is showing its teeth by building up its military weaponry, becoming increasingly aggressive over Taiwan and by going out of its way to be friendly with rogue regimes round the world. While the US and China need each other economically, the two giants can never be friends.
- Japan and Britain are the best friends of the US today, along with Australia, New Zealand, India, Singapore, Canada and certain countries in Central Europe (such as Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia). They should work together, stick together and address the US in a friendly but frank way.
- The Commonwealth membership today contains six of the fastest-growing, most advanced and knowledge-based economies in the world. It should open its doors to associates such as Japan and friendly European countries. Such a group would account for a third of the world's GNP. This is the platform on which to build a successful partnership with the US for the 21st century.

A PREVAILING CONSENSUS

Britain badly needs a new foreign policy appropriate to the 21st century. Our interests are not being protected and promoted as they should be. Nor is our contribution to global peace, stability and prosperity as effective as it could or should be.

To do better, we need partners and allies in an interdependent world. But they need to be the right ones. Specifically, our international stance must become less narrowly Euro-centric and be adapted to make much more use of the more modern and far more adaptable Commonwealth network which is at our disposal.

Taunted recently by MEPs the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, angrily asserted, that 'our future lies in Europe'. 'They are our colleagues and partners', he added.

Of course he is right that geographically Europe is our region and neighbourhood. He is right, too, if he means that the health, stability and prosperity of this wonderful Continent are very much in Britain's interest. We must always be – and have nearly always been – good Europeans. We must make big sacrifices (as we have done in the past) to this end.

But, alas, the Prime Minister means much more than that, and this is where the flaws and fissures in his stance, and in the whole shape of British foreign policy, begin.

What he believes, and many like him, is not only that our future lies in the European Union but that our international stance, purposes and interests, should be looked after by the institutions of the European Union and subsumed in a broader common EU foreign policy.

'We must work' say the policy-makers, 'through our European partners'. That is our supposed destiny.

In other words, he and others who think like him see British foreign policy as being primarily to contribute to the EU positioning and to make that policy work effectively. This remains the general consensus, and is

certainly shared by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The strategic priority, as set out by the FCO in its 2003 White Paper (*UK International Priorities*), is to help make the EU foreign policy a reality, because that indeed is where our future is said to be. In the words of that document, 'UK influence in the EU will be central to achieving the UK's strategic priorities'.¹

'Working with our European partners' has been the mantra of FCO thinking for three decades. The essence of British foreign policy has been that while bilateral links between Britain and other countries remain important, and our links with the US especially important (and given new life by the alliance over Iraq and the Blair-Bush bond), the main and central concern has been 'getting Europe right'. It is to the Europe of ever closer union and deepening integration that Britain's 'destiny' (a word used rather less recently than in the past) is supposed to beckon. It is through the EU collectively that our relations with the world, including our trans-Atlantic relations, are best worked out. Or so it is said.

Despite the wobble over the Iraq invasion, and the EU Constitution fiasco, that central idea still seems to be alive and well in London, largely embodied in the concept of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), with Javier Solana, the EU's would-be Foreign Minister,² as its herald and instrument.

THE CONSENSUS IS WRONG

But should it be so? The brutal truth is that EU common foreign policy, in so far as it exists at all, is not serving or protecting

¹ See Cm 6052, December 2003. 'An effective EU in a secure neighbourhood' is featured as number four strategic policy priority out of a list of eight. Numbers one and three are generalities about a safer world and the rule of law. Number Two calls for protection of the UK from illegal immigration, drug trafficking etc. So number four is really the premier policy aim of substance.

² The proposed but blocked new EU Constitution creates the post of EU Foreign Minister.



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British interests in modern conditions very well. It seems a poor 'centre' to rely on. Few would disagree that nowadays effective foreign policy needs partners and allies – more so than ever in this network age. Even the hardest-line go-it-alone merchants in Washington now acknowledge that.

But does the EU provide us here in the UK with the right partners? As the centre of economic gravity in the world moves to Asia, is the EU helping us in our relations with China? With India? With the developing world in an equal and friendly relationship? With the turbulent Middle East? With Russia? With the unstable Central Asian Republics? And above all, with the US, our traditional ally, seemingly so powerful and yet also so vulnerable?

The briefest reality check should tell us that EU policy is of little positive benefit in any of these areas. Indeed, it has become a serious hindrance. The trans-Atlantic relationship is particularly worrying. In EU hands, it has now fallen to the lowest point for decades. Far from the EU calming and clarifying trans-Atlantic disputes by speaking with one clear voice, it seems to be amplifying them so that what were once containable second-class differences are being elevated into damaging first-class rows. The Atlantic is growing wider. This is not at all in Britain's interest.

For all its armed might, the US desperately needs real and trusted friends, not just to fulfil its awesome world responsibilities, to sort out Iraq, to clarify its own thinking about geo-politics, to cope with the new would-be nuclear powers and to handle the rise of China, but to deliver security to its own citizens.

True friendship means frankness, candour, criticism when appropriate (as long as its is constructive and not born of ill-will), mutual

trust and respect and, albeit occasionally, a restraining hand.

The EU does not fulfil any of these roles. The rhetoric of EU-US partnership may continue, but even if Javier Solana could articulate a common European policy towards the US, why should he get more than a cold nod from the Administration? Why should Washington give a respectful hearing to an entity which it sees as anti-American, sounding less like a friend and partner and more like a hostile bloc – a transatlantic neighbour from hell, picking a quarrel on every issue, large or small.

Sixty years ago, Britain fulfilled the role of the steady partner and friend – at least up to a point, although as Winston Churchill found out, this became difficult as the US began calling all the shots in conducting Allied policy in World War Two. Then there was Kennedy's twin pillars

idea in the Cold War context, although it was never a phrase that could stand too much analysis. NATO, too, was going to be the binding link of equals.

But now all that is history. The question to be answered is where we look for the partnership or grouping which the US will listen to and work with, and from which the world, and especially Britain, would benefit.

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SOME UNREALISTIC ALTERNATIVES

One conclusion that must be ruled out is that the US will listen to Britain alone. A conceit of the Blair Government has been that a special relationship can somehow be resurrected between London and Washington. First with President Clinton, and then with President Bush, it was claimed that a kind of personal chemistry can ensure the continuation of real British influence on American thinking.

A variant of this is the idea that Britain is some sort of bridge between the US and Europe. Sir Christopher Meyer's readable but much criticised account of British Prime Ministerial and other visits to Washington brings home the vainglorious absurdity of these dreams, describing vividly the mixture of obsequiousness and awe-struck deference shown by the British visitors in Washington to the President and his entourage.³ As Sir Christopher implies, it only needed Mr Blair to promise undying loyalty and unconditional commitment, to be 'with you at the first and we'll be with you to the last' for Washington policy-makers to conclude that capture was complete. Little further attention to any 'conditions' or qualifications from the British was warranted, except, of course, the ritual diplomatic *politesse*. The Washington thought bubble has been easy to read all along. Nice to have the British on board, it goes, but no need to take much notice of what they say.⁴

Just as the US has gradually discovered that it cannot go it alone, so the same applies even more strongly to the UK. Partners and allies are required in an inter-dependent world; and such partners must have sufficient clout and cohesion for Washington to want to listen to them and to have to listen to them. Neither condition applies in the case of the EU, whose anti-American stance makes it an unwelcome visitor in Washington. Worse, it is a worthless interlocutor, having divided views on almost everything, stagnant economies and a minimal force contribution to make to world policing.

A whole army of European leaders, experts, officials and apologists have wasted years chasing after a flawed belief that Europe can somehow be welded into a solid bloc that will carry weight on the world stage, counter-balance American hegemony and confront Asian challenges.

³ Sir Christopher Meyer, *DC Confidential*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005.

⁴ Sir Christopher also argues (*ibid.*) that Britain possessed, and could have used, more leverage with the Americans over its Iraq policy. This is doubtful, although things might have been different if we had turned up with a few credible and heavyweight friends (i.e. not the EU).

These people seem not to have grasped that networks have now replaced hierarchies and blocs. They seem not to have understood that the advent of the information age, the new era of globalisation and the huge consequential dispersal of information and power make old-style central authority and governance redundant. People power has now been e-enabled, humbling high authority while making the whole business of government much more difficult and subtle, and transforming not merely governments but relations between governments as well.

This applies as much to the EU as to the nation states within it. Trying to recreate the EU in the image of the 200-year-old United States was a foolish mistake.⁵ It was worse, because it has distracted the Europeans from the real new tasks to which they should be applying their combined strength – namely combating the rise of global terrorism, international crime and the warped power of fanaticism which also derives its dangerous growth from the information revolution. This is the dark side of globalisation.

OUR REAL FRIENDS

Where then should the UK be looking for real friends and allies on whom it can rely? With whom can it make an effective input to global strategy and stability? The neglected answer lies on its doorstep. The Commonwealth, a voluntary association of 54 independent states, operating on an advanced, 'open' system of co-operation and networking, both formal and informal, offers the basis for a structure of remarkable potential and relevance to the conditions of the 21st century.

The long-standing neglect of the Commonwealth, or perhaps more precisely the traditional mixture of boredom and disinterest – both in the higher reaches of British government and part of the Foreign Office – has three origins.

⁵ As proposed by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing when presiding over the European Convention which gave birth to the draft Constitution.

First, in the past, the Commonwealth seemed preoccupied with bashing the UK, criticising its colonial and post-colonial role, demanding more aid and generally making the British the focus of blame for under-performance. To British opinion much of this criticism seemed unfair and ignored the record of relatively successful de-colonisation.

Second, the Commonwealth seemed to offer no clear economic attraction, while the original European Community clearly did. The days of Empire preference were gone, emerging Commonwealth markets failed to emerge (with the exception of Singapore) and foreign investment looked elsewhere.

Third, the Commonwealth, while retaining the Queen as its titular head, seemed to have no organisational hierarchy or drive at the centre. It appeared incapable of turning talk into influence and action.

As we shall see, the first of these perceptions fell out of date in the 1990s or earlier. The second has more recently been overtaken by major shifts in the shape and direction of the global economy. The third view may be correct analytically, but is now becoming a strength, and not a weakness, in the network age. In a short time – perhaps too short for the attitudes of the policy-making establishment to catch up – the Commonwealth has changed almost beyond recognition. We are now looking not at a nostalgia-tinted grouping of slow-growing or stagnant economies but at one of the most successful collections of nations ever, with some of the central drivers of economic growth in its midst.

Aside from this utterly transformed economic scene, two billion people (31% of the world's population) are now linked together in the existing Commonwealth by broadly common legal systems, by countless cultural and sporting links, by widespread use of British education syllabuses and

exams and by a huge network of associations, exchanges and friendships – from the British point of view a treasure house of soft power, influence and opportunity.

The British Government has failed to seize the opportunity. This is regrettable. But it is not too late.

TEN YEARS OF DISAPPOINTMENT.

Ten years ago, in 1996, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee produced a seminal report, *The Future Role of the Commonwealth*.

When it appeared, this Report was greeted with loud praise. It seemed to be saying something new and important. Its central message was that the Commonwealth, far from being past its time, was acquiring a new significance in the modern world by virtue of its unique network qualities. The Report argued that the

Commonwealth of yesterday, with its historic connections, had given way to something quite new and not yet fully appreciated. It was no longer a fading and constantly whinging talking-shop but a real and dramatic resource for the future benefit of all its members, especially Britain. It was no longer a historical organisation with a superficial club-congeniality, marked by regular gatherings and photo opportunities. It now had real value, passion, purpose and relevance.

Strings of recommendations for re-enforcing this new reality were included in the Report, some of which have indeed been implemented.⁶

Yet, disappointingly, nothing has happened. Indeed, the Commonwealth has probably lost still more of its shine over the last 10 years, as it has struggled rather ineffectually

The Commonwealth is not a nostalgic group of stagnant economies but one of the most successful collections of nations ever.

⁶ See the 72 recommendations for stronger Commonwealth co-operation, at both official and informal levels, in the 1996 FAC Report *The Future Role of the Commonwealth*.

with the tragedy of Zimbabwe, and as other great dramas have passed it by.

Why did so little happen? Its flaw, probably, was that it tried to build new hopes and new structures on old and weak foundations. The Commonwealth concept of shared values, customs, language and countless exchanges at both governmental and non-governmental levels, remains as valid as ever, or even more so. But the Commonwealth *framework* needs re-assembling on a more ambitious scale, to meet new needs in the transformed global conditions now prevailing.

Ten years ago, the US was the one dominant and, so it appeared, invulnerable superpower; world peace rested, perhaps too heavily, on the United Nations; and a united Europe, so it was believed, could play a kind of bloc role in counter-balancing US might and protecting and projecting its member states' interests and influence.

Now these perceptions can be seen to be either wrong or too small. The new security challenges are global. Issues like terrorism, energy security, migration, disease control, climatic upheavals and disasters all demand a world-wide network of approaches. Meanwhile the centre of economic gravity is shifting fast – away from the old West and into Asia, with the three super-giants, a resurgent Japan, China and India at the heart of the new order.

But the shift of circumstances is even more complex and deeper than this. The pattern of international capital flows is beginning to change. Investment which used to flow from West to East, from Europe to Asia, is going into reverse, with Chinese and Indian acquisitions in Europe and the US mounting.⁷ At the same time a 'south-south' stream of investment is building, with India, South Africa, Malaysia and Singapore all becoming substantial suppliers of capital to other (mainly Commonwealth) developing countries.⁸

⁷ Japan has long been ahead of the Asian game and investing in Europe, especially in Britain.

⁸ As well as to the more advanced West, especially and happily, the UK.

An even more powerful development is the supply-chain phenomenon. This has enabled producers to disaggregate and outsource crucial segments of the production process, whether services or manufacturing, to lower-cost operations in developing countries.

The alliances and groupings of the near future, to be economically comprehensive and efficient, need to consist of both advanced and developing countries. It is true that the enlarged EU has been able to benefit from low-cost operations out-sourced to the newer central European member states (amid many complaints about unfair low-wage competition). It is also true that Western firms have, despite the political risks, out-sourced to China. However, the opportunities are far riskier and more problematic than those offered by the trans-continental Commonwealth network – a structure which entwines economies at virtually every level of the per capita income and wage scale, from the lowest to the richest and highest, in a network of common values, practices and legal procedures.

There is also the question of size. Small countries have proliferated in the last 30 years and, empowered by information technology, seek a more equal voice with the larger nations. In the EU they have been conspicuously denied this.⁹ But in the Commonwealth forum, it is a different story. There, 32 smaller states speak on equal terms, and without being patronised, with 20 or so larger ones. India may be the giant, but it is a giant among equals. Promoted by the Commonwealth Secretariat, enormous efforts have been made to understand and assist with the problems of smaller nations in today's world conditions. Working under the aegis of special expert groups, smaller states have

⁹ See President Chirac's insulting injunction to the smaller nations of the EU that on the Iraq issue it was a good time to keep silent. British policy has also been to 'cosy up' to France and Germany, in an attempt to form some sort of Big Three domination, and to ignore or even damage the interests of the smaller states, many of whom used to look on Britain as their champion.

been made particularly welcome – in stark contrast to the big-power dominated EU.

But the most striking feature of all is the rise of India. In terms of purchasing power parity, India is already the world's fourth largest economy. It has become one of the world's biggest producers and exporters of software. And it is growing at 8% p.a., a fraction slower than China (according to official statistics). Predictions and extrapolations must be treated with caution, but India's share of world GNP is expected to rise from 6% now to 11% by 2025. By 2035, India's GNP will exceed that of Western Europe. Together with the US and China, India will form the third 'pole' of the global economy.

Of course there are dark sides. One quarter of India's population still lives in abject poverty (it was half in 1978). Regional disparities are vast. But the new overall picture is undeniable. India has become an economic powerhouse. It is indeed the jewel, not in the Crown, but in the Commonwealth.

Thus we have a ready-made and intimate network of nations, large and small, rich and poor, developed and developing, all embraced in the same wide web of linkages.¹⁰

The Commonwealth includes some of the most dynamic and fastest growing knowledge-based economies in the world – not just India but Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Canada and Britain itself. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer is fond of reminding us, this is in sharp contrast to many EU states. The Commonwealth also includes some of the poorest countries in the world who are greatly in need of support and friendship.

¹⁰ In per capita terms, of the total of 54 states, seven can be categorised as high-income, 23 as mid-income developing and 24 as low-income poor.

The Commonwealth's official structure also provides a perfect umbrella for a mass of non-governmental affiliations and bonds which give a substance and strength to international relations of a kind which official inter-governmental exchanges cannot provide.¹¹

The Commonwealth is a ready-made laboratory for the types of coalitions and alliances which are going to work in the 21st century. As a channel for promoting the healthiest and most fruitful kinds of relationships between the richer and poorer world, and for poverty reduction and successful development, it offers a far better prospect than any other institution inherited from the past century. Above all, it is an open and voluntary system, excellently adapted to the age of the world-wide web, and requiring no heavy central institutions, or constitutions, or a massive central budget to make it work.¹² On the contrary. With the slimmest of resources, the Commonwealth

maintains the momentum for improving human rights, for a deeper entrenchment of the rule of law and for sound governance. It has no need for any large central bureaucracy or accumulation of powers.

Being part of the EU is useful to the UK. But it is not going to help us much in these new conditions. The difficulty is one of history. The EU is designed on traditional 20th century lines of central institutional control and a hierarchy of powers (or competences).

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¹¹ The 1996 FAC Report put the number of unofficial Commonwealth organisations at 242. The figure today may be bigger still.

¹² The annual budget of the entire Commonwealth secretariat, including all its administered programmes, is £38 million. This is 49 times smaller than the annual administrative costs of the EU Commission (£1.87 billion). A Commonwealth Mark II might require some strengthening of the Secretariat to organise its new and stronger 'voice'. But it would still be a relatively small affair.

It was created in a different world from the one that is now emerging. In the words of a leading columnist of the *Financial Times*, the EU has become ‘the wrong institutional platform to deal with globalisation’.¹³ We need something more to keep us connected, refreshed, in touch – and also safe.

TOWARDS A COMMONWEALTH MARK II

On paper, today’s Commonwealth has the kind of spread needed for these new purposes. The trouble is that it is not nearly wide enough, nor confident enough to use its weight and authority. For a start, the old rule about confining the Commonwealth to English speakers and former members of the British Empire needs revising. In fact it has already been broken with the inclusion of Mozambique and Cameroon. English is anyway the language of the information age, the necessary universal second tongue. The US speaks almost as much Spanish as English.

So the English-speaking world now means everything and nothing. The best approach is therefore to think in terms of bringing into this network of common wealth and interest all the nations interested in associating with Commonwealth values and objectives. It should be open to any country which is going to dedicate itself in earnest to protecting and promoting our commitments, security and democratic inclinations. That should be the focus of a truly contemporary British foreign policy.

Which countries should an enlarged and more ambitious Commonwealth embrace, and who should it leave out?

The exclusions should be the ‘vendetta countries’, those that hate the US on principle, that hate the advanced world on principle, that are still submerged in anti-colonial bitterness and prejudice, that do not care for poverty reduction or the place of women or the dispossessed and do not want to join or strengthen the international system of trade and security.

¹³ Wolfgang Munchau, “Hell is Europe talking globalisation”, *Financial Times*, 31 October 2005.

The new inclusions should be the nations who have shed all this baggage, who see trade, entrepreneurialism and innovation as their guiding stars, who have no time for protectionist blocs and practices, who do not believe that development is all a question of bigger aid donations, and who are prepared to do their full bit to preserve peace and resolve conflicts in a way the UN seems incapable of doing.¹⁴

So the Commonwealth leaders should open their books and minds to like-minded and powerful countries, large and small, which broadly share these ideas and approaches. If outright membership seems too radical, then a looser form of association might be considered. One obvious candidate for this kind of relationship is Japan, a nation reviving economically, democratic, increasingly dedicated to helping world stability and peace, generally committed to open trade, and seeking a relationship with the US which is supportive without being compliant or subservient – just what the world needs.¹⁵

The greater Commonwealth of the future should not stop there. Thailand could be invited into the association network as could some EU members, too. Poland and Norway would be obvious and welcome members of the team, and Turkey, too. All these countries are instinctively on the side of innovation, open trade, strong Atlantic links and do their utmost for peace and stability. Then there is Russia. The day could come when a renovated Russia, shedding all its past complexes, could join the Commonwealth Mark II and play a truly constructive part in

¹⁴ The cavalier belief that giving larger aid donations to developing country governments promotes development is still one of the most insidious and damaging convictions amongst aid campaigners. Years of evidence that aid flows actually paralyse development, prolong poverty and buttress mis-government are ignored.

¹⁵ Canada, too, already a member of the Commonwealth and increasingly keen to strengthen it, is showing a healthy tendency to reassess its relationship with the US on a less subordinate but basically friendly basis.

it.¹⁶ Nor should some Latin-American candidates be overlooked in due course.

The Commonwealth Mark II could also offer a particularly attractive home for many of the smaller nations in a dangerous world. It could provide a far more favourable forum than they are currently finding whether in the EU or at the United Nations.¹⁷ The tremendous vigour and courage of states like Slovenia and the three Baltic states, would of course be most welcome.

This kind of grouping would have real weight. Its opinions would count in the councils of the world. And this would be not just in high-sounding moral terms. Collectively within this grouping there is a vast wealth of peace-keeping experience, as well as of sheer economic power, technological strength and trading weight. (With Japan added, the Commonwealth Mark II would command – today – just under 32% of the world's GNP). This grouping would be geographically disparate – but today one click on a computer keyboard bypasses all physical separation and can bring allies into the same room.¹⁸

The might, size and reach of the new grouping, suitably co-ordinated, would give its members the chance to correct the most dismal feature of today's geo-politics – namely the collapse of American soft power

A Commonwealth Mark II would have real weight. Its opinions would count. It would have peace-keeping experience, as well as economic power, technological strength and trading weight.

throughout almost the entire world. It is a measure of American policy mis-handling that a recent survey in a large number of Western states showed majorities in every one of them now put closer ties with China above ties with the US – to the delight, perhaps even amazement, of Beijing.¹⁹

A strengthened Commonwealth, committed to democratic reform and the rule of law, reaching across continents and faiths,²⁰ and also with a deep purse, should be able to do better. It should be able both to offer an alternative to China's fortuitous gain in reputation by default and in due course to give a helping hand in restoring the battered credibility of the US.²¹ One Commonwealth could speak to another in terms of genuine equality and mutual respect.

A FRESH FOREIGN POLICY FOR BRITAIN

The implications for British foreign policy strategy are profound, positive and exciting. We should now abandon the misguided belief that our foreign policy can be conducted, or our interests protected and promoted, primarily through our EU partners collectively. Their aims are not ours, their weight in the world is not sufficient and their relations with the US are hopelessly compromised. Besides, the important world trade and investment issues are now globalised and best handled through the WTO forum rather than through Brussels or Washington, or raucous

¹⁶ Embracing Russia is anyway going to be something of a necessity, now that it is emerging as a key energy nation with an 'empire of pipelines' supplying the West with gas and oil.

¹⁷ At the last count 81 members of the UN were not democracies and had governments which did not believe in, or practise, democratic values – the price of universal membership.

¹⁸ The Commonwealth Mark II would have just under 40% of the world's population, a third of the world's annual GNP at approximately \$10 trillion, slightly more than the US and one fifth more than the EU (World Bank Development Indicators).

¹⁹ See a survey by Pew Global Attitudes, June 2005. This survey also showed that majorities in every Muslim country polled believe that it would be good if China became a military rival to the US.

²⁰ The Commonwealth currently includes 500 million Muslims.

²¹ This may also require not merely a refinement of US foreign policy but also a re-opening to international perspectives, from which it has been woefully cut off in recent years.

exchanges between the two.²² Again, the new Commonwealth Mark II would carry a bigger, and probably more unified, voice in world trade negotiations than the EU.

So it is this widened and more confident partnership which should now be the foundation of Britain's foreign policy. This new determination should be reflected in all international fora where Britain and other Commonwealth members have a voice.²³

But the implications are not all on the external side. A nation's stance and standing in the world are directly linked to the cohesion and health of the society within. As Japan's leader, Junichiro Koizumi, put it recently, 'Diplomacy is directly linked to internal affairs'.

Pollsters tell us that interest in foreign affairs comes well down the list of voter preoccupations, far below health, education and crime. But this is because they are putting forward 'foreign policy' as a compartmentalised category. They are therefore asking the wrong question. Most people do not think in these terms. They can see, but may not express, how the nation's status and positioning in the wider world in practice is directly linked to their daily lives, to their jobs, their families' welfare and security, the local environment and countless features which determine their quality of life.

For example there have been well-founded complaints that our multi-cultural society in Britain has merely led to a mosaic of isolated, and even hostile, communities with no common allegiance and no rallying point for their loyalties.²⁴ This is hardly surprising in a country which subcontracts its foreign policy to the EU. Make a redesigned Commonwealth the context for our international aims and hopes and Britain becomes a cause worth loving, respecting and working for. In other words, a clear exposition of our foreign policy purposes will help us to define ourselves within – something which those caught up in the current obsession with seeking to mark out 'Britishness' should understand.

In the last decade or so, whether by accident or design, the UK has become a microcosm of the existing Commonwealth. This should be built upon as an asset in the next stage of Commonwealth development. Indeed, the 'Commonwealth within' could be a powerful network in an economic sense as well. The deep knowledge about, and contact with, the markets and business networks of almost every Commonwealth country – not just at the big corporate level but even more at the more intimate (and often more dynamic) personal and family levels – is a significant asset, as yet unrecognised.

For everyone there is a need to have a country and to love it, however unfashionable it may have been in recent years to say so. There must for each one of us be a place to stand, a place to grow up. People, like plants, need soil in which to send down their roots. Those who say we can all live nowadays without a country, or content ourselves with trendy notions of the post-modern state and the international community, or even some higher European loyalty, are mistaken. Love of country is not a vague principle but an everyday necessity.

²² This is not the place to argue for a return to the old idea of a Commonwealth Free Trade Area. But the WTO breakdown demonstrates that the EU 'voice' is far from the most effective in advancing either UK trade interests or the cause of poverty reduction and world development.

²³ At the November 2005 meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government a call was made for Commonwealth member states to present a common and robust front for a fair and balanced liberalisation package, and, in the event of WTO failure, for consideration to be given to the revival of the idea of a Commonwealth Free Trade Area. The Commonwealth Secretary General duly registered his disappointment at the WTO, and subsequent outcomes of the Hong Kong Ministerial meeting. But there was no sign whatever of British attempts to carry this alternative initiative forward, or indeed to support a strong common Commonwealth front at all on world trade issues.

²⁴ See for example, the recent comments by Trevor Phillips, Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality.



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The genius of the Commonwealth is that it reconciles that need with the equal need for common action. Nor does it demand blank cheques of supra-national renunciation.

To summarise, let us enlarge and strengthen the Commonwealth, broadening the very concepts on which it was founded. Let us place it at the very heart of our foreign, economic and security policies, while encouraging all other member states would do likewise.

This would not make us bad Europeans. Intimate regional co-operation with our European neighbours continues to be required in many vital areas. Nor does it make us lapdogs of the US. On the contrary. We would have the opportunity to shape a far more effective voice in dialogue with the US. Nor does it make us neglectful of the UN: the worst disservice that can be done to the UN, reformed or unreformed, is to expect and demand of it the purpose and unity which it can never, by its nature, deliver.

Finally, it would not make us a builder of new international institutions in a world already overburdened by such bodies, some of them far less accountable than they should be. On the contrary, given the tools of the information age, only the lightest structure of bureaucratic co-ordination is necessary to achieve rapid co-ordination and coherence.

So let us start moving towards a Commonwealth that can realise all those hopes of the FAC Report a decade ago. Let us enjoy the happy consequence of providing Britain, the originating member, with a new and effective foreign policy with real edge. And let our inner nation and society gain from this the purpose and cohesion which today it so demonstrably lacks.

CONCLUSION

Of course it makes sense for Britain to work ceaselessly for prosperous commerce in the European region where it is placed, for healthy investment flows, low tariffs and fair-trade rules. And, of course, it makes sense to have neighbourhood policing and close collaboration with neighbours on issues like

the environment, crime and immigration. The EU can still partially fulfil these regional roles, despite its dated structure and procedures.

But it makes even more sense to recognise the undeniable fact of the dominant power of the US and to seek to influence the wielding of that colossal power in a friendly and constructive way, allowing Commonwealth to speak to Commonwealth on terms of unambiguous equality and genuine mutual respect.

This is something China will never do and that the leading EU states have shown they cannot do. France has played almost no role at all in assisting American-led policy in Iraq and the Middle East (except recently over Lebanon). German leaders have fought a whole election on an anti-American ticket.

So, rather than facing a choice, the countries of the Commonwealth network, plus like-minded allies such as Japan, face a clear and constructive way forward. As real friends of the US, they should form a cohesive and intimate grouping – a permanent, reliable and sturdy coalition of the willing and the responsible. The platform and model for that grouping should be an open and forward-looking Commonwealth of nations, including both developed and developing, richer and poorer, but all on equal and friendly terms and linked not by patronising condescension but by common values and intentions. If some of the attitudes and policies of the US worry them, they should say so, and they will be listened to. They will have more influence than any other blocs, institutions or alliances.

That is now much the surest way toward global stability and balance in this dangerously unstable 21st century, and offers much the best guide for the re-direction and re-invigoration of Britain's enfeebled foreign policy.



PERSPECTIVE

THE AUTHOR

David Howell is on his fifth political career, having served as Director of the Conservative Political Centre, Junior Minister in the Heath Government, Cabinet Minister in the first Thatcher Government, Chairman of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee and now as Conservative Foreign Affairs Spokesman in the Lords and House of Lords Deputy Leader of the Opposition. He is also the former Chairman of the UK-Japan 21st Century Group and a journalist and economist.

The views expressed in this pamphlet are entirely personal and are not party policy

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