



Common ground

As the Commonwealth prepares to take centre stage, *Geographical* investigates exactly how relevant the organisation is in the 21st century, and what role it may perform in an increasingly uncertain future

by Chris Fitch

April is a big month for the 53 nations and nearly two-and-a-half billion people that make up the Commonwealth. First, Australia's Gold Coast will kick start the 21st iteration of the Commonwealth Games, as more than 6,000 athletes and team officials go head-to-head, with hundreds of prestigious medals at stake. Then, once the Games come to a close, Commonwealth world leaders will convene in London for the latest Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the organisation's biennial opportunity to sit down and discuss its most pressing issues.

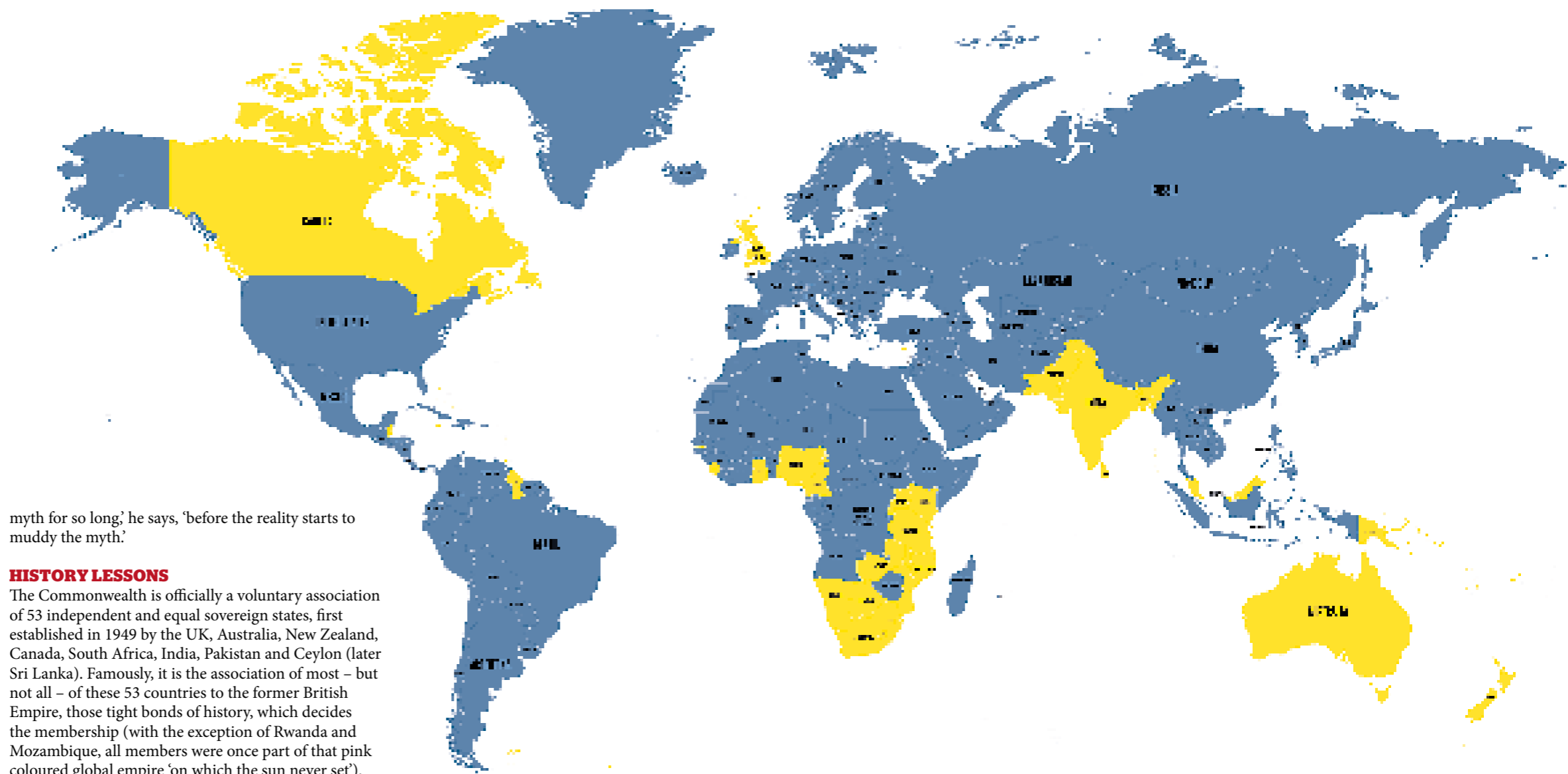
For many onlookers, this may well include a pondering of what exactly the point of all this is. How relevant is an eclectic membership club such as the Commonwealth in the 21st century? Is it a genuinely successful positive legacy of the British Empire (after all, the Commonwealth Games were once called the 'British Empire Games') or an attempt to whitewash the past? Do outspoken critics who rage against the organisation with cries of neo-colonialism deserve any sympathy for their accusations? Or could it in fact be the exact opposite, a democratic, even deliberately anti-colonial entity?

PROBLEM SOLVING

'I'm a sceptic when it comes to the Commonwealth,' declares Philip Murphy, sitting forwards in his office at the University of London's School of Advanced Study. Murphy is Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICwS) and author of the 2013 publication *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, The British Government and the Postwar Commonwealth*. 'Having seen it in action, I became increasingly convinced that it was almost a total mirage,' he continues. 'You keep on reaching out to touch something solid... and nothing appears. It's very good at pumping out these lovely candyfloss soundbites about how it's going to solve world peace, save the rainforest and end world poverty. But eventually you ask the Emperor's New Clothes question: what have you actually achieved? And you're faced with shocked silence, as though you don't really understand the true beautiful mystery of the Commonwealth.'

Murphy has spent the past decade at ICwS and is in no doubt about the Commonwealth's legacy. 'I'm afraid, while I've been here, it's largely been a history of failures, mismanagement, and disasters,' he sighs. 'You have this organisation which is the result of an Empire falling apart. It can be a useful tool, it creates a sense of mood music. But there's a huge kind of discrepancy between the sort of hopes that are sometimes invested in the Commonwealth, and what is actually achieved.'

There is only one significant moment in history in which Murphy agrees the Commonwealth played a significant role: the end of apartheid and the transition to majority rule in South Africa. 'But the problem is that an organisation can only live on a sort of heroic



myth for so long,' he says, 'before the reality starts to muddy the myth.'

HISTORY LESSONS

The Commonwealth is officially a voluntary association of 53 independent and equal sovereign states, first established in 1949 by the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, India, Pakistan and Ceylon (later Sri Lanka). Famously, it is the association of most – but not all – of these 53 countries to the former British Empire, those tight bonds of history, which decides the membership (with the exception of Rwanda and Mozambique, all members were once part of that pink coloured global empire 'on which the sun never set'). The word 'voluntary' is hence a crucial component of how the times have changed; each 'independent and sovereign state' has actively opted to be part of this organisation, even as other former British colonies have chosen to opt out.

The official creation of the modern Commonwealth Secretariat occurred in 1965, when Canadian diplomat Arnold Smith was appointed the first Secretary-General. Stemming from these early days comes the current vision; to 'help create and sustain a Commonwealth that is mutually respectful, resilient, peaceful and prosperous and that cherishes equality, diversity and shared values,' with a mission to 'support member governments, and partner with the broader Commonwealth family and others, to improve the well-being of all Commonwealth citizens and to advance their shared interests globally.'

'The Commonwealth has evolved into a rights-based association,' outlines Dr Sue Onslow, Deputy Director at ICwS and principal organiser on the in-depth Commonwealth Oral Histories project (an archive of interviews with key figures from the modern Commonwealth's history). 'It isn't a treaty organisation; nor does it focus on security issues and organisational collaboration in the way of the Francophonie, the comparable French post-colonial institution' (whose 84



states, territories and observer members share a *raison d'être* to promote the French language and associated cultural diversity).

Hence, the Commonwealth Charter (a recent addition to the organisation, officially adopted only in 2013) lays out the core values and aspirations of the Commonwealth, adopting firm language to preach in favour of progressive issues including the rule of law, enforcing human rights, democracy, gender equality, environmental protection, sustainable development, and much more. 'The issue, of course, is whether these are actually rules, or whether they are aspirational guidelines for its very varied membership,' adds Onslow. 'That's where, for many Commonwealth countries, it's a "work in progress".'

Work in progress is probably the most generous analysis of the many ways in which Commonwealth members are often accused of failing to walk the walk regarding the various values to which they have technically talked the talk by signing up to the Charter. For example, the modern Commonwealth now preaches an allegiance to democracy. But while Freedom House, the independent democracy index, currently ranks 31 of the 53 members as 'free' democracies, 18 only qualify as 'partly free', while four

countries – Cameroon, Brunei, Rwanda and Swaziland – are judged as being so undemocratic as to be considered entirely ‘not free’. It’s hardly a glowing endorsement for the concept of free and fair democracy.

‘When you start to talk about values, you get into all sorts of problems, even when you’re talking about democracy,’ says Murphy. ‘In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, no one cared a great deal whether members of the Commonwealth were democracies or not, so long as they were Western leaning. Indeed, the British Empire was not a democratic institution, and was very slow to introduce such ideas.’

There are also accusations of human rights abuses against some Commonwealth members, as became overwhelmingly apparent following the decision to allow the 2013 CHOGM to be hosted in Colombo, Sri Lanka, a state where then-President Rajapaksa and his government stood accused of war crimes committed during the long conflict with the Tamil Tiger rebels. The summit was a chastising affair all around, overshadowed by boycotts and controversy throughout. Furthermore, from Pakistan to Cameroon, Fiji to Mozambique, Jamaica to Australia, the 2018 Amnesty International State of the World’s Human Rights report flags up accusations levied against Commonwealth countries for various human rights abuses.

Additionally, the Kaleidoscope Trust, a non-profit based in London that champions equality and equal rights for LGBT people, highlights that 37 out of 53 Commonwealth nations still deem same sex acts a criminal offence, covering around 90 per cent of the Commonwealth population. ‘Homophobia is almost a Commonwealth value,’ quips Murphy.

‘One of the issues that binds our activists,’ says Paul Dillane, Executive Director of the Kaleidoscope Trust, which was a founding member of the Commonwealth Equality Network, an accredited organisation of activists collaborating across the Commonwealth, ‘is that despite the diversity of where they’re located in the world, the injustices they are struggling against are colonial-era laws exported by Britain which persist to this day.’ He is keen to point out, however, that with the Seychelles, Mozambique and Belize having decriminalised same sex acts since the last CHOGM, in 2015, there is at least some evidence of slow progress to celebrate.

Where does all this leave the Commonwealth, as a ‘family’ of nations with shared values? ‘We’re talking about a direction of travel, a set of aspirations that everyone wishes to have delivered,’ responds the Commonwealth Secretary General, Baroness Patricia Scotland. After a legal career that included becoming the UK’s first female attorney general, in 2007, she was subsequently elected as the Commonwealth’s first female Secretary General at the 2015 CHOGM. ‘The Commonwealth Charter basically reflects the Sustainable Development Goals. We’re all saying that the SDGs are what we aspire to. We’re not saying that every country has yet achieved them, because if we had, we wouldn’t have them as a goal. But it’s the same direction of travel. And it’s done something quite

Becoming and remaining a Commonwealth member has been a desirable course of action for many countries, despite the legacy of Empire

extraordinary: most of the countries – I can’t think of any exceptions – have used the SDGs as the basis for their national development plans.’

The Baroness Scotland argument is, in a nutshell, that the Commonwealth faces all the same development problems as the rest of the world, but that the basic shared characteristics of Commonwealth members – ‘the same language, the same common law, similar parliamentary systems, similar institutions’ – means the organisation can lead the way in pushing its values and solving major challenges on a global scale. ‘It’s that very diverse set of countries, coalesced around something from which they can jointly agree,’ she continues. ‘And it’s likely that they will reflect the sort of agreement that may be deliverable in the wider global community, because every other country in the other two-thirds [of the world] can probably find some country within our Commonwealth that looks like them, that represents their interests.’ In this way, she argues, Commonwealth agreements paved the way for the global adoption of both the UN Sustainable Development Goals and COP21 Paris Accord.

ANTI-COLONIALISM

Probably the most common criticism thrown at the Commonwealth, however, is the oft-stated argument that it is a neo-colonial anachronism, a throwback to Empire, with Britain refusing to let go of the network of colonies, dominions and territories once part of its domain. This has certainly been the opinion of choice for strongmen such as Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, the Maldives’ Abdulla Yameen, or The Gambia’s Yahya Jammeh, when they respectively pulled their nations from the Commonwealth.

‘I think it’s easy, from a public perspective, to see



The Commonwealth’s population is

2.4bn

60% is aged 29 or under

The combined gross domestic product of Commonwealth countries is estimated at

£720bn

Commonwealth countries make up

7 of the top 10

highest performing countries for gender equality

it as a colonial thing,’ acknowledges Dr Ruth Craggs, Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Geography at King’s College London. Craggs argues, instead, that the modern Commonwealth exists as a specifically anti-colonial entity, an institution which created space for discussions between the leaders of new nations, enhancing the interests of states which were once British colonies.

‘The Commonwealth is one institution that certainly many people in Britain, in the early years, invested in as a continuation of Empire,’ she says. ‘But certainly since the Secretariat was founded in 1965, it has worked hard, predominantly on the behalf of newly independent states. Its key rationales were racial equality, and also development and support for newly independent states trying to build their place in the world. So I think it has often been an anti-colonial space.’

As Craggs points out, becoming and remaining a Commonwealth member has certainly been a desirable course of action for many countries, despite the legacy of Empire. ‘A surprisingly few number of countries chose not to join the Commonwealth when they became independent, considering how violent and problematic lots of those decolonisations were, and surprisingly few have left it,’ she highlights. ‘So I think that tells you something about the Commonwealth’s value to nations that aren’t Britain.’

Numerous countries have, of course, had their membership suspended over the years. The Commonwealth’s main ‘weapon’ against members going ‘rogue’ has been to threaten to revoke their membership. While this may not be a punishment on par with economic sanctions, for example, that other multilateral organisations can dish out, it does remove the ‘imprimatur of respectability,’ as the ICWS’ Onslow puts it, which is gained by becoming a Commonwealth member. Plus, as Craggs points out, there is the global embarrassment to consider, making it a humiliating event few world leaders would want on their permanent record.

It’s also a situation in flux. Back in February, The Gambia rejoined the Commonwealth in a ceremonial flag-raising at Marlborough House, the organisation’s London headquarters, fulfilling a promise made by new president Adama Barrow when he defeated Jammeh at the ballot box last year. The overthrow of Mugabe has now got experts pondering whether even Zimbabwe – which withdrew in 2003, after being suspended the previous year – might soon also be re-joining.

DIPLOMATIC TIES

What is perhaps most interesting about the Mugabes and Jammehs of this world is the way they conflate the UK and the Commonwealth as the same entity. As Murphy explains, when Jammeh opted to pull The Gambia out of the club, it was in response to diplomatic pressure specifically from the UK, not the Commonwealth. In that sense, the somewhat benign Commonwealth suffers from decisions taken by the UK.

Yet it’s hard to find many credible arguments that the UK pulls the strings in the Commonwealth in any

meaningful way (aside from being one of the principle funders – the ‘ABC’ members alongside Australia and Canada). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is certainly not shy about the active contemporary involvement of the UK in the Commonwealth Secretariat, but is keen to emphasise its role as an equal, not as a neocolonial dictator.

‘We’re hugely honoured to be hosting the CHOGM,’ enthuses Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the United Nations. ‘I think by stepping in [Vanuatu was originally set to host the event, but it had to be reassigned after the island state was hit by Cyclone Pam in March 2015] it provides a huge opportunity for us to define that fact that Britain is a partner among that Commonwealth network. From a UK perspective, it allows us not to say “Look at us, you should do exactly what we’re saying”. This isn’t about finger pointing. It’s about how we can build a constructive relationship to help other countries move forward.’

While this means that the UK will happily use the opportunities offered by the Commonwealth network to improve children’s education, enforce cybersecurity, and promote human rights, he insists that this also includes the Commonwealth helping with the constant evolution of the UK’s own democracy, or passing on lessons which countries such as Ghana can teach the UK in helping to counter violent extremism, for example. ‘It’s not just about Britain providing answers, or Britain providing leadership,’ he affirms. ‘We’re there to live with our Commonwealth partners, but also to learn from them as well.’ Baroness Scotland adds a similar sentiment: ‘No one is good at everything, but everybody is good at something.’

Certainly, it is hard to have a conversation with people involved with the Commonwealth without constant references to networks and partnerships (which, as Baroness Scotland points out, is the final SDG, to build global partnerships for sustainable development). Dr Sue Onslow calls the Commonwealth ‘an extraordinary peoples organisation,’ comparing it to the professional networking social media website LinkedIn in its use of social networks, as well as the access to influential world leaders. Indeed, it could well be argued that it is exactly these networks that allow countries to nudge the positions of their fellow members towards fulfilling their commitments on honouring democracy, human rights, LGBT rights, and other such values.

‘I’m the product of parents of Indian origin, a born and bred Brit,’ highlights Lord Ahmad. ‘My wife is Australian, a product of Pakistani origin parents, and that gives our children a very enriched Commonwealth identity.’ He is keen to emphasise the personal and family networks which span the Commonwealth, in addition to the professional, legal, business and diplomatic networks which comprise its more formal wing. While the Commonwealth may no longer retain the free movement of people as seen across the European Union, the strength of that fabric of interpersonal connections appears strong, while the rights and privileges of Commonwealth citizens can still be seen in their right to vote in domestic elections, for example.

TRADING PLACES

After several years in which the future of the UK’s place within the EU has rarely been off the front pages, the country’s membership of the Commonwealth has in some circles emerged as a potential counterweight to any economic hardship which could befall the country outside of Europe. It is widely anticipated that the UK will be keenly hosting trade discussions on the fringes of the upcoming CHOGM, and trade is one of the first points Lord Ahmad makes regarding the UK’s aspirations for the Commonwealth, stating that ‘the Commonwealth advantage is not fully leveraged.’

That ‘Commonwealth advantage’ is a frequently-quoted 19 per cent reduced cost of doing business that supposedly exists between Commonwealth states, and is even quoted by Baroness Scotland as she describes her relief at the World Bank reporting a recent rise in productivity across the Commonwealth. ‘There’s the ability now for the Commonwealth to see not only how it can strengthen and intensify that unity, but produce real economic advantage,’ she insists. ‘We have to put the “wealth” back into “Commonwealth.”’

Rhetoric emerging from Whitehall last year saw the UK’s efforts to tap into the existing Commonwealth network, in order to expand trade relationship with the relevant countries, dubbed ‘Empire 2.0’. Yet, Office of National Statistics (ONS) figures make for sobering reading on this front. While EU trade is currently a central pillar of the UK’s international trade, the UK’s fiscal relationship with the rest of the Commonwealth falls far short. ‘The Commonwealth makes up a relatively small part of UK trade, particularly versus the EU,’ outlines James Wells, Head of UK Trade at ONS. ‘Around 11 per cent of UK exports went to the Commonwealth in 2016, versus 43 per cent to the EU. So, as you can see, our export trade with the EU is four times larger than with the Commonwealth.’

‘It’s not about Britain providing answers or leadership. We’re there to live with our Commonwealth partners, and also to learn from them’



Australia’s Gold Coast prepares to welcome athletes to the 2018 Commonwealth Games – perhaps the most public-facing aspect of the organisation

A special forecasting tool known as the ‘Gravity model’ (named after the way gravity influences the movement of celestial bodies in outer space) can be used to consider the three key parameters important for determining the effectiveness of a trading relationship: the distance between countries, the size of economies, and the suitability of each others’ respective goods and/or services. As Thola Ndlovu, trade economist in the UK trade branch at ONS, explains, the vast distances between Commonwealth nations, especially when compared to the compact EU trading network, would be only the first potential obstacle to overcome. ‘Distance is one factor,’ she agrees. ‘Second, they’re not as big as our European counterparts. And they’re not exporting the things that fit our economy, and our growth.’ It suggests significant challenges would need to be solved in order to create any vast trading network between Commonwealth members.

‘It’s absurd,’ states Craggs flatly, shaking her head. ‘It’s completely absurd. No one in the Commonwealth Secretariat or in any serious position in the Commonwealth would ever be associated with that as an idea. That comes from a complete misunderstanding of what the Commonwealth is, even what Empire was by the end. That has no founding at all in the way that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the Commonwealth Secretariat use and see the Commonwealth, as far as I’m concerned.’

QUESTIONS OF RELEVANCE

As the 6,000 athletes prepare for the 2018 Games, all dreaming of standing atop a podium with a medal, it is also an opportune time – with the Commonwealth forced back into international consciousness – to question whether it is still deserving of a gold itself.

It could be argued that both the Commonwealth’s present and future prospects are as uncertain as those of the country whose imperial ambitions inadvertently spawned its existence. Like Britain, it finds itself somewhat stuck in the past, yet simultaneously trying to modernise in order to avoid falling behind the rest of the world into irrelevance.

‘I think the Commonwealth’s never been more relevant,’ declares Baroness Scotland. ‘In this frankly rather troubling and troubled world, we’ve never needed the Commonwealth more.’ Opponents will argue it has long since outgrown its purpose.

The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. In its day-to-day reality, the Commonwealth is an ordinary, bureaucratic multilateral institution, focused on incremental change through diplomacy and information sharing, just like many others. The only significant difference is its unusual evolution and somewhat random membership, due to being rooted in cultural and political history, rather than regional geography or economic ties.

So while the Commonwealth might not be the family of shared values the Secretariat may claim (or at least wish) it to be, because of those overlapping histories, and therefore overlapping cultural, social and political points of reference, such as speaking predominantly the same language, there are undoubtedly powerful forces at work, transforming the lives of people who otherwise might well have never crossed paths. That legacy, while far removed from the purpose of the British Empire, or even what was perhaps envisaged when the Commonwealth was created nearly 70 years ago, is nevertheless a happy accident worthy of being acknowledged and, some might argue, even celebrated. |