

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con)

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My Lords, I declare my interests in the register. I am grateful to the Government for making time for this debate. I was glad to see “evolving” in the Motion on the Order Paper; it brings home to us that the Commonwealth is a vital part of our present and future. It is very much part of the platform for our future, as Her Majesty the Queen observed long ago, and not at all something belonging to the past. I am grateful to my noble friend Lady Goldie for her characteristically excellent and clear introduction on the Government’s view of what is happening in the Commonwealth and where we are going.

We should be having such a debate anyway, regardless of the dramas of Brexit—indeed, almost independently of the Brexit event. Why? We are looking at Britain’s position in a totally transformed global context and a new cycle in the history of international relations. This is most visible in east and west Asia, not just because of China but because it embraces half the Commonwealth network, including India and some of the world’s most dynamic countries, such as Bangladesh, which is completely ignored by the British press despite being one of the fastest-growing high-tech economies on earth.

Of course, the Caribbean nations—this side of Asia, as it were—are also vital. Incidentally, almost every one is much-visited by Chinese activity. Canada is a key Commonwealth member, with its great interest in CANZUK, the Canada-Australia-New Zealand-UK network on ideas for a major advance in Commonwealth trade and investment co-operation; again, it is completely ignored by the British commentary but it is vital. In fact, the change of leadership in Ottawa currently being mooted would give a stronger Commonwealth push from Canada than ever.

Then, there is the resurgent Africa, with 19 Commonwealth nations and China as its largest trading partner. It is a continent of huge hope but terrible and severe problems, about which the noble Lord, Lord Boateng, spoke so eloquently. I thank him for his kind personal remarks.

However, the rising, motivated, super-dynamic Asia—both the Asia-Pacific region and central Asia—is shaping our future here in Europe and in Britain. Many areas of the world traditionally considered in the sphere of the West are already turning eastwards and linking up with the emerging Asian system. The Gulf states, Turkey,

large parts of Africa, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, south-east Asia and India, with its Look East policy, all spring to mind. Meanwhile, for those who doubt Asia's arrival on our scene, we must note Italy's new deals with China and Asian links all over central Europe. For example, Mr Xi Jinping visited Rome to sign huge new deals with Italy only last week.

Asia produces, exports, imports and consumes more than any other region on earth. It now contains several of the world's largest economies, most of the world's foreign exchange reserves, many of the world's largest banks and industrial and high-technology companies, and most of the world's biggest armies, with the obvious exception of the United States. It contains most of the world's new giant cities, many of them with infrastructure unmatched in the West and often a hundred years ahead of anything we have here. Asia is the key to our future. Networks are the key to Asia, and the Commonwealth is by far the biggest network on the planet. A sustainable, prosperous and secure Commonwealth is utterly in our national interest, never more so than now. As chair-in-office, this year is our opportunity to contribute. Given our departure from the European Union—if it happens—and with our alliance with the USA looking increasingly wobbly, this is the clear direction in which our new role and national purpose lies.

A great deal has been done by Her Majesty's Government, particularly by my noble friend Lord Ahmad, the Minister, who unfortunately cannot be here. He has given real momentum in government, the best he can, to many of the realities we now face, such as the importance of a sustainable, prosperous and secure Commonwealth. He has done very well indeed, and I congratulate him—but there is an enormous amount still to do.

It is not just a question of having a heads of government meeting, black Mercedes cars going here and there, government communiqués and so on. It is not just a question of fulfilling the aspirations and intentions of the communiqués, although many of them are very good. There is a whole list of new goals that we should be working towards to demonstrate and fulfil our commitment to proper engagement in the Commonwealth system: helping to build a new Commonwealth trade and investment agenda; exploiting the enormous digital wealth of the Commonwealth, which is linked to our common language, common law and common standards; fostering more exchange between the creative industries, vastly helped by our common language and part of the new pattern of the soft power age, which we do not fully recognise; making the 70th anniversary a major event, which the Minister rightly said we are getting on with, so that is good; strengthening intelligence, defence, military and naval ties, where there is

enormous scope; reducing intra-Commonwealth travel obstacles, both for business—as already occurs among ASEAN businessmen: half of Asia has completely free movement for business—and for dealing with the student situation, which is not at all satisfactory at present. We need a standing body to assess potential new members—of which there are several—and readmissions such as, one hopes, Zimbabwe one day, although clearly not at present and in its present condition. We need to review all DfID and ODA programmes to reverse the shrinking proportion going to the Commonwealth—I think the heads of DfID have grasped this point, but I am not at all sure that that message has reached over to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. We need to move forward with our own potential and vastly important membership of the comprehensive, progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, which already includes several key Commonwealth countries.

As with a huge iceberg, the bulk of intra-Commonwealth activity and networking today lies beneath the radar of conventional diplomacy and its media coverage. Experts and opinion-formers, accustomed to looking only at what goes on between Governments and what is fed out at official level, completely miss the new reality: that the world is moving outside the familiar interstate system and that power and influence now flow between new international bodies, networks, interests, professions, businesses, university systems and causes, regardless of national boundaries, on an unprecedented scale. As I hope my noble friend Lord Marland will remind us—he will speak later in this debate, and has done so much to invigorate Commonwealth trade—these are the great, largely non-governmental institutions of the modern Commonwealth. We must work to leave them stronger than when we took them over, when we hand over the chairmanship of the Commonwealth to Rwanda next June.

It is the flexibility and informality of the Commonwealth family that make it so much more resilient than the old, more hierarchical structures of the 20th century that we inherited. Remember that the Commonwealth has no treaties; it is not a treaty-based organisation and is entirely voluntary. This makes it the ideal system for the digital age of massive grass-roots empowerment and connectivity. Of course, all families have their inner tensions and problems, as the noble Lord, Lord Boateng, reminded us. All networks have their problem points. The modern Commonwealth needs new kinds of enlightened and sophisticated governance to guide it through these shoals. A specially appointed—and perhaps rather extravagantly named—High Level Group, of which I had the privilege to be a

member, was charged last year with adapting the structures of Commonwealth governance to entirely new world conditions.

In Britain's case it is no secret that our country is struggling to adapt and redefine its role in a revolutionised world. Looking at the scene from an admittedly selfish British viewpoint, it is clear that the modern Commonwealth provides Britain both with the ideal transmission mechanism for the considerable soft power influence we have and with an excellent opportunity to make the contribution to world peace and prosperity to which the better side of the British character has always aspired. To strike a positive note, it really is heartening to see how the British establishment—wandering for a biblical 40 years or so in search of a narrower European destiny—is now returning to the larger Commonwealth fold, re-forging old links and seeking new ties in a transformed international milieu. Let us wind back two or three decades; frankly, few expected the morning would ever come when Britain would need access to the huge new markets and swelling capital resources of key Commonwealth friends, notably the giant and dynamic new India. Yet now that morning has arrived.

Nobody planned any of this; to use the word from the Motion, it was not planned to evolve this way. There were no blueprints. On the contrary, all too many were ready to write off the Commonwealth as a relic of the past. They did not foresee that networks have their own agendas and their own capacities to mesh together, without waiting for higher instruction, official guidance or approval. They did not foresee that the swirl of communications technology would advance the interweaving process in a manner never matched before in human history, thanks to common language, common law, common standards of accountancy and, above all, a great degree of that invaluable element: trust.

I know that many Commonwealth countries may well now be quizzical about the UK's newfound enthusiasm for working with them, given the sharp downgrading of UK Commonwealth interest from 1972 onwards. As we return 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 old relationships. Not only has the Commonwealth of 1949 gone, the Commonwealth of the 20th century has gone and been replaced by an assembly of countries that includes some of the world's fastest-growing economies and middle-income consumer markets. This is the network of friends and democracies with which we must now face a very uncertain future together. We need to be clear in our minds that we are re-engaging with Commonwealth countries not in some kind of post-colonial paternal role but as a key part of the United Kingdom's new economic and

security strategy in a transformed world. The Commonwealth is a key channel through which to exercise our full responsibilities in today's disturbed and uncertain world conditions. I hope leaders of all parties and of all great institutions in this country have grasped that this is the path we now have to follow.

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