

Lord Howell's address to the High Commissioners' dinner at the Guildhall
14.03.17

Sir David, Prime Minister, High Commissioners and Excellencies, , Aldermen and Sheriffs and distinguished guests .

My simple task is to thank our three wonderful speakers for their wise words.

You ,Prime Minister, lead a small nation with a great imprint. Malta has always been important in European history but it has never had such influence and power as it has today, with you at its head. As both President of the EU and chair of the whole Commonwealth network you are the nearest thing today to suzerain Lord of the entire globe – a massive role which you have fulfilled brilliantly.

You, Tim ,are a hugely distinguished public servant and in your last job a most successful British Ambassador to Japan. You probably thought you deserved a rest after that assignment, but now you have on your shoulders the enormous responsibility of guiding Britain, Government and people alike, towards welcoming and hosting the Commonwealth Summit this time next year – a task you are fulfilling with great skill and verve.

Incidentally my Japanese friends have a great interest in the Commonwealth. One of them asked if Japan could join. I said I did not think it was possible since we had HM the Queen as our head and they had their Emperor. Back came the reply 'What about a joint venture'!

You, Sir David, representing the present Lord Mayor , have yourself been a highly successful Lord Mayor recently, making a major contribution to strengthening Commonwealth ties and links.

I have myself had several relatives in the same role as Lord Mayor over the years. In fact my grandfather was Lord Mayor 78 years ago. No-one ever asked me to make a speech thanking him. This may be because I was three years old at the time.

Anyway, my warmest thanks to you and through you to the City of London Corporation for so generously supporting this event in combination with the RCS.

My other duty is to thank you all our guests for being here tonight. I have heard some people ask what the point was of the Commonwealth Trade Ministers meeting here in London last week – the first ever. After all the Commonwealth is not a trade bloc and never will be.

Such doubters miss an absolutely fundamental point.

What they were , and are, ignoring is that the nature of global trade has changed in the last decade- radically, fundamentally and disruptively , and is still doing so – fast.

The spread of almost total and continuous connectivity and the plummeting cost of communications and information transfer inside global value chains has utterly altered the

world trade pattern, producing a new wave of globalisation which demands new kinds of networks and pushes old trade bloc thinking into increasing irrelevance. In effect production has become largely internationalised, with the separate stages and processes being spread between different countries. Gone are the simple days when one country made a product and exported it to another.

These are conditions in which like-minded countries, with minimum language and culture barriers, and maximum similarities in legal and commercial procedures, are bound to be the winners. *So by luck, rather than by good judgment or planning, the modern Commonwealth network fits like a glove on to this new pattern and framework.* That is what now brings us, impels us, together as never before.

Of course the Commonwealth network is not the only beneficiary of this new trade landscape. But with English as the working language, with dozens of Commonwealth-wide professional links, with its common legal systems, its shared values, with its network of 530 Universities operating within a linked system and with its ferment of digital exchanges of deals and initiatives expanding daily, it cannot but be the ideal and superbly fertilised seed bed in which both trade and investment of every sort are bound to flourish.

It is little wonder that several other countries are showing interest in joining the Commonwealth, or being closely associated with it, such as Ireland. And it is no wonder that the Queen, with greater perception than most, has described it as 'In many ways the face of the future'

We at the RCS, with our branches across the globe, will play our full part in binding the Commonwealth together, with initiatives and research ranging from vastly upgrading the role of women, to boosting youth entrepreneurship, literacy and creative industry encouragement, to saving the world's forests. We see ourselves as the master frame-makers in which the picture of trade expansion, security co-operation and common commitment to democracy and the rule of law can be painted and presented. We will work closely with the City Corporation as they, too, give binding depth to this picture with their financial reach and skills.

Ladies and Gentlemen, We are a family and a network bound together by trust in a thoroughly dangerous and unsettled world. Yet in this stormy context I believe the Commonwealth is on the pathway to new relevance, new purpose and new prosperity.

My country will play its part and draw strength from its Commonwealth friends and allies, as we build our modern relationship with a reformed EU.

I wish you all the best good fortune on our joint journey ahead.