

Are you willing to be made nothing? Is Commonwealth reform possible?

FRANCIS BAERT AND TIMOTHY M. SHAW*

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled,
made nothing?

Are you willing to be made nothing?
dipped into oblivion?

If not, you will never really change.¹

The above passage is from 'Phoenix', one of the last poems of D. H. Lawrence. Like the firebird, international organizations seem never, or rarely, to die, as Susan Strange has provocatively argued.² The British empire is long gone, but out of its ashes grew the Commonwealth, a somewhat awkward, idiosyncratic network. It is no surprise, then, that most analyses of the Commonwealth consist of existential musings: for whom and for what purpose does it exist? Its *telos* is elusive, even for the most ardent followers, such as James Mayall: 'I think of the modern Commonwealth as a happy accident. If it did not exist it would neither be necessary nor perhaps possible to invent it.'³ Hedley Bull's comment in the middle of the last century is telling: 'Too close an inspection might serve only to explode the "myth" of the Commonwealth and accelerate its continuous progress of disintegration'.⁴ If a recent poll is to be believed, most British people have no idea about the purpose or policies of the Commonwealth: in a survey of 100 senior United Kingdom decision-makers from media, politics and the civil service, only 25 per cent of respondents correctly identified the Commonwealth when its activities were described.⁵

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¹ D. H. Lawrence, 'Phoenix', in *The complete poems of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 614. The phoenix can represent many aspects of human life, including empire. See R. Van den Broek, *The myth of the phoenix, according to classical and early Christian tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 9.

² Susan Strange, 'Why do international organizations never die?', in Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek, eds, *Autonomous policy making by international organizations* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 213–20.

³ James Mayall, 'Introduction', in James Mayall, ed., *The contemporary Commonwealth: an assessment 1965–2009* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 3. Even the very identity of the Commonwealth as an international organization has been the topic of debate: see William Dale, 'Is the Commonwealth an international organisation?', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 31: 3, 1982, pp. 451–73.

⁴ Hedley Bull, 'What is the Commonwealth?', *World Politics* 11: 4, 1959, pp. 577–87.

⁵ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The role and future of the Commonwealth. Fourth Report of Session 2012–13* (London: The Stationery Office, 2012), p. 24, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmfaff/114/114.pdf>, accessed 14 July 2014.

For the Commonwealth, unknown and increasingly unloved, every misstep is the beginning of a new episode of existential quandary. The year 2013 was a deep low in its recent history. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo was overshadowed by controversies about the bad human rights record of the host country, Sri Lanka, which resulted in the absence of many important heads of state and a concluding communiqué which could not expunge the diplomatic fiasco. If not the first, it was certainly the most controversial CHOGM, with the host accused of human rights violations by the highest UN human rights authorities. Now that the circus has left Colombo, it is time to pick up the broken pieces. The year 2014 may be a more joyful one for the Commonwealth family, in particular given the sportive cheers (and tears) that the Glasgow Commonwealth Games will bring, but the aftertaste of the last CHOGM is very bitter. This year of 2014, then, should serve as a period of contemplation leading up to the important year that follows: for 2015 represents a symbolic turning point for the Commonwealth Secretariat, marking the half-century since its creation in 1965.

Since the end of the Cold War and the return to membership of South Africa in late 1995, the organization has been seeking a new vocation. Many reform proposals have been made. These have not led to much change, and may increasingly cause ‘reform fatigue’, a phenomenon encountered in the history of many classic international organizations. More importantly, they may lead to a further marginalization of the organization in the present century as the number of the world’s states, and of the issues that preoccupy them, continues to grow. Resources are scarce, especially those available for dealing with international affairs, human development and global public goods since the decline of the Washington Consensus. Furthermore, there has been a proliferation of agencies advancing novel forms of ‘global governance’ and rule-making involving increasing roles for the private sector, civil society, transnational advocacy groups, partnerships and networks.⁶ So should we even bother about the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth has much to contribute to the development of this new, more diffuse and highly complex picture of global governance. With its postwar membership consistently weighted towards developing countries, it is well situated to capture energy from the seemingly unstoppable process of global rebalancing. For example, with India and South Africa in its ranks, it includes two of the five BRICS as well as a quarter of the G20 (Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and the UK). In the current decade, Africa is growing as fast as Asia; most Commonwealth members are situated in these two ‘Southern’ continents, so can the Commonwealth usefully contribute to the post-2015 world of development?⁷

In our view, current debates around Commonwealth reform miss the point. As the world evolves in response to financial crises and economic rebalancing, no single international organization can be hegemonic: they all need to network with

⁶ Andrew Hurrell, *On global order: power, values, and the constitution of international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6; see also esp. ch. 4.

⁷ Anthony Payne, ‘How many Gs are there in “global governance” after the crisis? The perspectives of the “marginal majority” of the world states’, *International Affairs* 86: 3, May 2010, pp. 729–40.

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a range of inter- and non-governmental global and local organizations in hybrid coalitions. Many proposals for reform have been introduced during the past 20 years but most of them have evaporated. In this article we try to understand why this has happened, and to offer some ideas on how to overcome this desultory legacy. The Commonwealth's strongest claim is to privilege its third, informal, non-state dimension, identified below as the centrepiece of Commonwealth Plus networks.

The silent road of reform

The latest round of reform proposals started at the Port of Spain CHOGM in 2009, which established an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) under the chairmanship of former Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Between July 2010 and July 2011 the EPG held five meetings and received around 300 written submissions from various Commonwealth organizations, Commonwealth Secretariat staff, Commonwealth commentators and the attentive public. Its reform proposals were contained in *A Commonwealth of the people: time for urgent reform*.⁸ This EPG report consisted of no fewer than 106 recommendations. Among the most heatedly discussed were the proposals for the adoption of a Commonwealth Charter and the establishment of a Commonwealth Commissioner for Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights. Although keenly anticipated, the Charter adopted at the beginning of 2013 only reaffirms existing non-binding declarations. The Commonwealth Commissioner is not being introduced, as this was a bridge too far for many member governments, especially those in the global South.

Although thoughtful and timely, the report of the EPG made the same mistake as most other reform proposals within such a diverse multilateral setting. Despite consulting a wide variety of stakeholders and interested partners, the reform proposals do not consider concrete measures to sharpen the organization's profile, downsize, or refocus the scope and size of its activities. Reform should be more than a diplomatic act, making sure that no single input is neglected and that none of the interested parties feels alienated from the process; it should make the organization function better. Most of the time, the main message that emerges is that the organization should do more, but within the same staff and budgetary constraints. One could call this the 'paradox of reform'. A lot of diplomacy, less management.

A Commonwealth of the people does not make many strategic choices on which issues to cover. One of the major problems with today's intergovernmental Commonwealth is that it tackles almost all aspects of international affairs—almost like a mini-UN—but without the necessary mandate, toolbox, human resources or financial capacity. In short, the Commonwealth—or Commonwealths, given the existence of both interstate and non-state forms—needs to network with compatible mixed actor coalitions, sometimes as leader, often as follower, and we increasingly observe it to be a follower.

⁸ Commonwealth Secretariat, *A Commonwealth of the people: time for urgent reform. The report of the Eminent Persons Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government* (Perth, October 2011), <http://www.sirronaldsanders.com/Docs/EPG%20Report%20FINALprintedVersion.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2014.

For many the Commonwealth is a champion of the global South, especially small island developing states (SIDS).⁹ Other recurring themes are the promotion of human rights and democracy, and the management of economic globalization.¹⁰ A glance at the website of the Commonwealth Secretariat shows activities in at least a dozen fields from democracy promotion to engagement with youth. Does this extensive range of activities reflect the motives for members' participation? Does it make an impact? Such questions deserve further investigation and should inform discourses around global governance. But in order to conduct any such investigation we need first to dissect our object of study.

A strange animal

Unlike almost all other international organizations, the Commonwealth consists of a wide variety of different organs and bodies, commonly referred to collectively as the 'Commonwealth family'. Since 1971 the Commonwealth itself has stuck with the definition contained in the Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles and reaffirmed in the newly adopted Charter: 'a voluntary association of independent states and equal sovereign states, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and co-operating in the common interests of our peoples and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace, and influencing international society to the benefit of all through the pursuit of common principles and values'. The voluntary character of the organization is lauded by many. Without this, the Commonwealth might not have survived for so long after the demise of the British empire. For political pragmatists it is also rather comfortable to be part of an organization that causes few waves and has minimal authority. How many members would have signed a binding Charter? As the spokesperson of the Nigerian Senate, Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe, recently stated: 'I am not aware that the Commonwealth of Nations is making laws for Nigeria. Nigeria, as a Federal Republic, is an independent country. Our association with the Commonwealth of Nations is voluntary. The fact the Commonwealth of Nations makes any law or signs any charter does not necessarily mean that we must accept such.'¹¹ Even so, occasionally countries are suspended, although this entails few risks or transaction costs. This is reflected in Pakistan's 'membership flip flop'. The country left the organization in 1972, rejoined in 1989, was suspended in 1999—a ban which was lifted in 2004—suspended again in 2007, and readmitted again in 2008.

⁹ Ronald Sanders, 'The Commonwealth as a champion of small states', in Mayall, ed., *The contemporary Commonwealth*, pp. 83–102. The SIDS also formed their own Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) group, which comprises 44 of the world's small island states, and is one of the strongest defenders of binding rules regarding greenhouse gas reductions. So, aside from the Commonwealth, SIDS found it necessary to have their own advocacy group.

¹⁰ Timothy M. Shaw, *Commonwealth: inter- and non-state contributions to global governance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

¹¹ Purna Sen, 'Commonwealth Charter is a fig leaf that will change little for LGBT people', *Open Democracy*, 27 March 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/purna-sen/commonwealth-charter-is-fig-leaf-that-will-change-little-for-lgbt-people>, accessed 14 July 2014.

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In our quest to understand the Commonwealth, we found a useful framework in the innovative work of the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP).¹² Traditionally, many analysts of the UN use Inis Claude's classic distinction between the UN as an intergovernmental arena of member states (a club of states) and as a secretariat (a bureaucracy led by the UN secretary general).¹³ The UNIHP proposed to move beyond this by adding a 'third UN' to the analytical framework. This 'additional' UN consists of NGOs, academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions and other groups of organized individuals in civil society that routinely engage with the first and second UNs. The third UN's role includes advocacy, research, policy analysis and idea-mongering, and is a reflection of the growing complexity of global issues and resultant global governance structures; it embodies the conception of 'multiple multilateralisms'.¹⁴ Adopting such a scheme to explain the Commonwealth enables us to see more clearly some of its mysteries and limitations.

The 'first Commonwealth' (the 'official Commonwealth'), then, is an inter-governmental organization of 53 states covering one-third of the world's population.¹⁵ Its members are located in a wide range of regions: Africa (18), Asia (8), the Americas (3), the Caribbean (10), Europe (3) and the South Pacific (11). Reflecting its origin as a successor to the former British empire, almost all of its members are former colonies. The modern Commonwealth took shape through the 1949 London Declaration which facilitated India's membership as a republic. All the member states, except for Mozambique and Rwanda, have experienced direct or indirect British rule. Originally a group of just eight countries, nowadays the Commonwealth includes a quarter of UN member states and a wide range of polities, differing widely in size, development, geography, hard or soft power, culture, religion and other aspects. Every two years this group of states meets for discussion at the CHOGM, around which non-state forums also gather. The next such meeting is scheduled to take place in Malta in 2015 (it was originally planned for Mauritius, but moved owing to that country's boycott of the Colombo meeting: it is traditional that the head of state of the new CHOGM host country should be present at the preceding meeting).

Members are represented in several bodies of the organization, the most important of which is the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG),

¹² Francis Baert, 'The United Nations Intellectual History Project and the role of ideas', in Bob Reinalda, ed., *The Ashgate research companion to non-state actors* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

¹³ Inis L. Claude Jr, *Swords into plowshares: the problems and prospects of international organization* (New York: Random House, 1956).

¹⁴ Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis and Richard Jolly, 'The "third" United Nations', *Global Governance* 15: 1, 2009, pp. 123–42.

¹⁵ Fiji is currently suspended, Gambia left voluntarily in 2013 and Zimbabwe forsook the organization in 2003 under huge pressure. The 53 current member states are: Antigua and Barbuda,* Australia,* Bahamas,* Bangladesh, Barbados,* Belize,* Botswana, Brunei Darussalam, Cameroon, Canada,* Cyprus, Dominica, Fiji, Ghana, Grenada,* Guyana, India, Jamaica,* Kenya, Kiribati, Lesotho, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nauru, New Zealand,* Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea,* St Kitts and Nevis,* St Lucia,* St Vincent and the Grenadines,* Rwanda, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands,* South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu,* Uganda, United Kingdom,* Vanuatu and Zambia. Members marked with a * are Commonwealth realms, in which the British monarch is head of state.

established in 1995 to deal with serious or persistent violations of the Commonwealth's fundamental values. The Group is convened by the secretary general and is composed of the foreign ministers of nine Commonwealth member countries, supplemented as appropriate by one or two additional ministerial representatives from the region concerned. Member states are diplomatically represented in London through the system of high commissioners.¹⁶ Over time, their leisurely reflections at 10 Downing Street and then Marlborough House in London, including weekend retreats at the government's country houses of Chequers and Dorneywood, became more compressed and less elegant.¹⁷

This first Commonwealth group of 53 states has delegated some authority to three bureaucracies that jointly form the 'second Commonwealth' (the 'Commonwealth bureaucracy'): the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning. Kamallesh Sharma of India, the fifth secretary general, heads the Commonwealth Secretariat. The secretary general can represent the organization at international forums and provide good offices. Traditionally, commentators on international affairs have paid little attention to international bureaucracies. This comparative disregard has lessened over recent years, as scholars have become more interested in autonomy, power, dysfunction and change in these bureaucracies.¹⁸ In contrast to their counterparts in the EU or the UN, the Commonwealth civil servants are highly dependent on what the first Commonwealth decides. Central to ComSec here is the Executive Committee, which meets every three months, makes policy recommendations, and oversees budgets and audit functions. It consists of 16 member state representatives: eight from the largest funders and eight from other countries selected on a regional non-permanent basis. Compared to similar bodies in many other international organizations, its size and budget are very small. With under 300 staff, it is comparable in size to the UK Office of Rail Regulation, Education Scotland or the UN canteen in New York.¹⁹ A large proportion of its staff deals primarily with support activities such as human resources, communications, public affairs and IT. Other divisions of the Commonwealth Secretariat do not really correspond with the programmes and activities of the organization; indeed, there appears to be an enormous mismatch—as for instance with human rights, an issue that receives a lot of media exposure and support from powerful member states, but is followed up by only a limited number of Commonwealth staff.²⁰

¹⁶ Lorna Lloyd, *Diplomacy with a difference: the Commonwealth Office of High Commissioner, 1880–2006* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹⁷ Shaw, *Commonwealth*, p. 41; Stuart Mole, "Seminars for statesmen": the evolution of the Commonwealth summit', *The Round Table* 93: 376, 2004, pp. 533–46.

¹⁸ Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the world: international organizations in global politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Office for National Statistics, 'Civil Service statistics 2012', *Statistical Bulletin*, 24 Oct. 2012, table 11, pp. 32–3. According to these statistics, the FCO has a staff of 5,840, DFID 1,700. See http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_284549.pdf, accessed 14 July 2014. See also House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The role and future of the Commonwealth*, examination of witness Kamallesh Sharma, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, 19 June 2012.

²⁰ Report of the one-day conference held by the UK Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 'The Commonwealth in crisis: is reform possible?', 15 Nov. 2012, Deller Hall, University of London, p. 9, <http://www.sirronald-sanders.com/Docs/Commonwealth%20in%20Crisis%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2014.

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Some did not consider the small size of the secretariat a problem. Sonny Ramphal, the second Secretary General, stated: 'Overall, the Commonwealth Secretariat [is] a small organisation, and ought to remain so ... the Secretariat should be seen as developing not in quantitative but in qualitative terms; as functioning in the area of development and promotion of ideas, constituting something of a Commonwealth think tank in a whole variety of areas; and trying to place on the ground ... machinery and agencies of practical cooperation.'²¹ Of the Commonwealth's £48 million budget in 2009/10, only 15 million went to the Commonwealth Secretariat for the day-to-day running of the organization. The remainder was allocated to two specialized funds: £30 to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), and £3 million to the Commonwealth Youth Program (CYP).²² The amount of money allocated to the Commonwealth Secretariat is equal to the yearly salaries of a few of the top football players of a Premier League club. Australia, Britain, Canada (the so-called ABC countries) and New Zealand fund most of the budget. An international organization depending so heavily on a few member states for its finances is vulnerable to sudden shocks. The withdrawal of funds from UNESCO by the United States had devastating effects on its day-to-day activities. Recently, Canada has announced it will review the level of its contributions to the Commonwealth.

The other two agencies are even smaller, with a combined staff of fewer than 60 people promoting the soft power dimension of the Commonwealth through cosmopolitan programmes of education, development, literature and language, reinforcing the idea that the Commonwealth is a platform to promote English language, culture and education in the world. The Commonwealth Foundation is a modest office based at Marlborough House in London. It can be seen as a bridge builder with civil society (the 'third Commonwealth') through its Civil Society Advisory Committee. The Commonwealth of Learning is a Vancouver-based body promoting open and distance learning. One of the main projects funded by the Commonwealth of Learning is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), covering 32 small Commonwealth states.

The limited number of countries funding the Commonwealth clearly indicates its vulnerability. Tensions between the first and second Commonwealth affect the exercise of its core functions. A perfect example is provided by the position of the chairperson-in-office, a fairly new position introduced in 1999. It is held by the organizing head of state immediately after the CHOGM until the next meeting two years later. So, although the tension surrounding the Colombo CHOGM may have eased somewhat, it is far from gone, and has implications far beyond the public relations disaster of the meeting itself. For not only has the Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa taken over from Australian PM Tony Abbott as chairperson, he has also become an *ex officio* member of the CMAG, a move that

²¹ Statement by HE Shridath Ramphal to Commonwealth Permanent Representatives, United Nations, New York, 18 Oct. 1976, cited in Stuart Mole, 'From Smith to Sharma: role of the Secretary General', in Mayall, ed., *The contemporary Commonwealth*, p. 61.

²² Commonwealth Secretariat, *60 ways the Commonwealth makes a difference* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009), <http://secretariat.thecommonwealth.org/files/215762/FileName/60Ways.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2014.

will silence the human rights monitoring group for the coming two years. The chairperson is an ill-defined position with the potential to become a diplomatic embarrassment. The Commonwealth could have saved itself further embarrassment if it had adopted the proposal in the EPG report to abolish this function.

Finally, the ‘third Commonwealth’ (the ‘people’s Commonwealth’) is an interesting and distinctive feature of the ‘family’. No fewer than 90 civil society organizations have close contacts with the Commonwealth Secretariat. These include prestigious institutions such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, the Commonwealth Press Union and the Commonwealth Games Federation (which organizes the summer games of over 70 countries every four years, alternating with the Olympics: by far one of the most popular features of the Commonwealth) and the growing number of NGOs and civil society groups such as the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI). The Commonwealth Business Council (CBC) brings together established and emerging market multinational corporations to advance public–private partnerships, including those with headquarters in the Commonwealth BRICS, India and South Africa (for example, ABSA, De Beers, DStv, Infosys, Nando’s, Reliance, Shoprite, Tata) and those that largely operate in the Commonwealth BRICS but have formal headquarters in Europe (Anglo American, ArcelorMittal) or the United States (SABMiller).

Timothy M. Shaw refers to Commonwealth(s) in his writings in order to highlight the extended family dimension.²³ Some of the larger of these organizations preceded the formal establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth of Learning or Commonwealth Foundation, but it was only in 1997 that CHOGM in Edinburgh formally recognized the extended Commonwealth family by arranging a platform for regular institutionalized interactions between the Commonwealth Secretariat and business, civil society and youth groups. Many activities of the Business, Human Rights, People’s and Youth Forums take place in the margins of the CHOGM and other ministerial conferences. Although this bottom-up civil society aspect of the Commonwealth may be applauded, here too the picture is not an entirely positive one. Many of these organizations do not need the official and bureaucratic Commonwealth to survive, and if the Commonwealth were to fail, many of them could just rename themselves and continue with their daily activities. Other organizations more closely associated with the first and second Commonwealths suffer problems associated with ageing (and largely male) memberships and financial setbacks.

In outlining these three Commonwealths, we have focused on the ‘formal’ Commonwealth institutions; the picture can be further expanded by taking into consideration an ‘informal’ Commonwealth, manifested in the Anglophone world through cultural phenomena such as Bollywood in India and Nollywood in Nigeria and sports such as cricket and rugby. Timothy M. Shaw calls this the ‘Commonwealth Plus’, to capture what he sees as commonalities across different

²³ Shaw, *Commonwealth*.

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states and societies of the Commonwealth, including the many diasporas. These have been diffused via multiple 'extra-official' or non-institutional features or networks of the Commonwealth such as culture, language and literature, media and sports, which enable the Secretariat and Foundation, Games and professional associations to claim a degree of influence.²⁴ The British Council, the BBC and other media organizations, the English-Speaking Union, Lonely Planet, Oxfam, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and other such bodies reinforce the Anglophone world which some have dubbed the 'Anglosphere'. This Commonwealth Plus very much reflects the changing character of Britain, the Commonwealth and the world.

Notwithstanding the existence of this wide variety of bodies and organizations, some of them in a precarious state, at the Colombo CHOGM a new episode of institution-building was announced. A Commonwealth Youth Council is to be based in Sri Lanka with funding from Pakistan; Mauritius proposed the establishment of a Climate Finance Skills Hub, and Malta a Small States Centre of Excellence. It was also decided at Colombo that a study on the easing of the cross-border movement of Commonwealth citizens engaged in bona fide travel would be commissioned, and an open-ended High-Level Working Group of Heads would prepare a Commonwealth response to the post-2015 development agenda.

Who is in charge? Internal challenges and competition

Since the Commonwealth has no formal constitution, it is guided by a series of agreements and precedents embodying its principles and aims, generally known as declarations or statements, and issued by the CHOGM. Together, these constitute a foundation of Commonwealth values and a history of concern in global affairs. The first fundamental statement of core beliefs is the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, which was issued at the 1971 summit in Singapore. The Declaration defines the voluntary character and consensual working methods of the Commonwealth, specifying the goals and objectives of the association. It was followed by many other initiatives: the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment (1989), the Harare Commonwealth Declaration (1991), the Millbrook Action Programme (1995), the Latimer House Principles (2004), the Trinidad and Tobago Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles (2009) and the Perth Declaration on Food Security Principles (2011), to name a few. In Colombo, this list was extended with three new statements: the Colombo Declaration on Sustainable, Inclusive and Equitable Development, the Kotte Statement on International Trade and Investment, and the Magampura Declaration of Commitment to Young People. This long list immediately shows the diverse set of topics covered by the Commonwealth. The analysis of the tripartite structure of the formal Commonwealth set out above has already indicated the wide variety of potential internal challenges and external influences with which it has to cope; in this section, we take a closer look at four overlapping internal issues which undermine

²⁴ Shaw, *Commonwealth*, p. 16.

the Commonwealth's claim to relevance and influence. All must be taken into consideration if successful reform is to be achieved.

Mandate

As noted above, the Commonwealth is guided by a series of declarations and statements that were eventually codified in 2013 by the adoption of the non-binding Commonwealth Charter. For many (especially media organizations and policy-makers in the West), the yardstick by which the success or failure of the Commonwealth is evaluated is its promotion of values. More specifically, this means its ability to promote human rights and democracy in its member states.²⁵ Recent instances have involved Fiji, the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe. From the perspective of the first Commonwealth, this is definitely the case. However, discussions on this matter are highly sensitive and run the risk of becoming ideological, or even merely philosophical, debates. The current reshuffling of power consequent on the rise of the BRICS has highlighted these debates.²⁶ Is the Commonwealth a force for good in the world? If so, is it better to exclude countries such as Sri Lanka? What about Gambia, now that it has unexpectedly left the Commonwealth, apparently without any forewarning or rationale? From the perspective of the second Commonwealth, human rights are less relevant than the rhetoric might suggest; as indicated, there is only a small human rights unit dealing with these issues on a daily basis. Economic and political relations among the member states are the focal issues; within these areas, development and youth are seen as particularly important, with dedicated funds allocated to them.

The wide variety of actors within the third Commonwealth represents a diversity of groups defined by religion, approach and many other factors. They symbolize the potential soft power role of the Commonwealth. It could be argued that overall the mandate of the Commonwealth is one of stimulating 'democracy, development and diversity' in the world: the three Ds. How these ideals may be put into practice is another discussion, for which only limited space is available here. With regard to democracy and human rights, the Commonwealth has been rather reluctant to act in the last decade; as the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee has pointed out: 'The moral authority of the Commonwealth has too often been undermined by the repressive actions of member governments. We were disturbed to note the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms for upholding the Commonwealth's values.'²⁷ A clear credibility problem also attaches to development. In 2011 a review of the Department for International Development (DFID) found that the Commonwealth did not live up to international standards and was offering poor value for money. This finding was backed by DFID's counterparts in Australia and Canada.²⁸ With regard to diversity, there is much

²⁵ James Mayall, 'Democratizing the Commonwealth', *International Affairs* 74: 2, 1998, pp. 379–92.

²⁶ Andrew Hurrell, 'Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be powers?', *International Affairs* 82: 1, 2006, pp. 1–19.

²⁷ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The role and future of the Commonwealth*, p. 3.

²⁸ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The role and future of the Commonwealth*, p. 35.

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still to be done. In the words of former Secretary General Anyaoku: ‘The world remains crippled by conflict and, in a globalised age, the fault lines are increasingly within states and communities rather than between nations. The terrors of the new age have released the curse of “otherness”; and difference is not a cause of curiosity and celebration but suspicion and fear.’²⁹ An important step has been taken by the Commonwealth with the thoughtful 2007 report *Civil paths to peace*, the outcome of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding chaired by Amartya Sen.³⁰ Although very timely, this report has not resulted in concrete policies. This confirms the general observation that first and foremost the Commonwealth needs to reflect on what it can do, and where it can make a difference. As Sir Ronald Sanders recently stated: ‘The Secretariat should retire (a) work that enjoyed no specific Commonwealth advantage, (b) work that could be better done by organisations with far greater resources; and (c) work that had demonstrated no particular impact.’³¹

The British imperial past and current ‘dominance’

For some analysts, the Commonwealth is not an organization of equals. Some British influence, if not domination or hegemony, might be presumed. Based in London, the Commonwealth is often seen locally as a vehicle for wider UK foreign policy strategy. In addition, its official head has always been the British monarch—since 1952, Queen Elizabeth II, who celebrated her diamond jubilee in 2012. The fact that the Commonwealth is based in London generates scepticism, even suspicion. Its location, especially the imperial aura of Marlborough House, owned by the British royal family, continues to indicate the colonial genesis, if not inheritance, of the organization. On the other hand, we would argue that it is not the organization’s location in the UK that is notable so much as its situation in cosmopolitan London, among that city’s many diasporas. London represents not only the past and present of the Commonwealth but also its multicultural, multiracial and postcolonial future.³² Networks of global cities are increasingly studied for their importance in global governance. Many of the non-state networks animated or orchestrated by the ‘Commonwealth of the people’ meet in London. And the city itself is one of the foremost in a growing network of mega-cities.

The UK has always felt reluctant to take the lead in the Commonwealth, but as its biggest donor it surely holds a special place. Krishnan Srinivasan, former Commonwealth Deputy Secretary General, argued for a more prominent role for Britain. The main message of his 2005 book was a plea for British leadership and prominence in the ‘British Commonwealth’.³³ This suggestion was met by separate

²⁹ Emeka Anyaoku, ‘Through the past, glimpses of the future’, in *Commonwealth yearbook* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009), cited in Mole, ‘From Smith to Sharma’, p. 63.

³⁰ Commonwealth Secretariat, *Civil paths to peace: report of Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007).

³¹ ‘The Commonwealth in crisis: is reform possible?’, p. 19.

³² John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: rewriting the metropolis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

³³ Krishnan Srinivasan, *The rise, decline and future of the British Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).

reviews from five prominent Commonwealth scholars, all of whom reacted with surprise to the author's main message.³⁴ The Commonwealth is rooted in British history and dominance but has long since grown beyond this. The official (symbolic) leadership issue is becoming acute as the Queen—the midwife of the Commonwealth in its formative period of decolonization—approaches 90 years of age, and it is compounded by the less attractive global image, and less relevant connections to the Commonwealth, of her successor, Prince Charles. The Queen is still formal Head of State of 16 of the Commonwealth members.³⁵ However, in a club of over 50 independent states, the majority of whose members are republics, this inheritance or relic of the past raises many questions.³⁶

Britain's reluctance to become more deeply involved is not helped by the fact that it does not now need the Commonwealth to promote the English language abroad. Globalization did that, thanks to US hegemony. Even in France, universities increasingly provide classes in English. As David Graddol notes in a British Council report, the reason for 'the current enthusiasm for English in the world is closely tied to the complex processes of globalization ... the future of English has become more closely tied to the future of globalization itself' as the global lingua franca.³⁷ The Commonwealth Plus, including Bollywood and Nollywood, promulgates its own versions of English.

Thought leadership

What will be the future of the Commonwealth when Queen Elizabeth II is no longer on the throne? Is she, as the *Telegraph's* Peter Osborne has stated, the only one who understands the true value of the Commonwealth?³⁸ In a broader context, who leads the Commonwealth? The UK cannot be considered the hegemon, and few other states seem willing to take the lead. Within Whitehall the Commonwealth is loved by few.³⁹ For the current government, it is largely a tool for keeping Tory Eurosceptics diverted. Although there are unique opportunities for other countries such as India and South Africa to take up a more prominent role, they

³⁴ W. David McIntyre, Stuart Mole, Lucian M. Ashworth, Timothy M. Shaw and Alex May, 'Whose Commonwealth? Responses to Krishnan Srinivasan's *The rise, decline and future of the British Commonwealth*', *The Round Table* 96: 388, 2006, pp. 57–70.

³⁵ For the list of Commonwealth realms, see note 15 above. Also to be taken into account are the 14 British overseas territories regulated by the British Overseas Territories Act 2002: Sovereign Bay areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Anguilla, Bermuda, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, the Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands, St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands. And New Zealand's responsibilities include Tokelau, the Cook Islands and Niue.

³⁶ Philip Murphy and Daisy Cooper, *Queen Elizabeth II should be the final head of the Commonwealth*, 'Opinions' (London: Commonwealth Advisory Bureau, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, July 2012).

³⁷ David Graddol, *English next* (London: British Council, 2006), p. 13. See also Timothy M. Shaw, 'Towards "new multilateralisms"? Globalization, anti-globalization and the Commonwealth', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 41: 3, 2003, pp. 1–12.

³⁸ Peter Osborne, 'Only the Queen understands the true value of the Commonwealth', *Telegraph*, 27 Dec. 2013. See also on this point Philip Murphy, *Monarchy and the end of empire: the House of Windsor, the British government, and the postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁹ For an exception, see David Howell, *Old links and new ties: power and persuasion in an age of networks* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

Is Commonwealth reform possible?

show great reluctance to do so. Within the Secretariat, the new buzzword is 'thought leadership', though it is unclear what the current Secretary General, a distinguished career diplomat, means by this. In the Sri Lankan controversy, he just shuffled off the responsibility for hosting the meeting in Colombo to the member states in a disastrous Channel 4 interview. This may have been technically correct, but the position of secretary general should be more than a nice retirement plan. During the last 20 years, secretaries general have shied away from any bold statements or concrete reform proposals, in contrast to their more 'dirigiste' predecessor, Sonny Ramphal.⁴⁰ This reduces the idea of 'thought leadership' to cheap business talk with little content. Or, as David Brooks fantastically observed in his satirical *New York Times* column: 'The Thought Leader is sort of a highflying, good-doing yacht-to-yacht concept peddler. . . . He spends spring break unicycling across Thailand while reading to lepers.'⁴¹

Membership

Some members and leaders are more active than others. It is often said that the Commonwealth mainly serves the goals of the SIDS. However, they account for only a small proportion of its population. There are often references in official documents to the 'Commonwealth of the people', which should not be confused with the 'people's Commonwealth'. If one takes this slogan at face value, then India and its people represent more than 50 per cent of the membership's population, and should therefore be the nucleus of Commonwealth activities.⁴² However, given India's ambiguous relationship with the Commonwealth, the organization is more likely to prefer to privilege other large, but more interested, players such as Nigeria, Pakistan and South Africa, or even Bangladesh, Malaysia and Singapore. The apparent lack of interest of the global South also contrasts with the unclear orientation of established, traditional players like the ABC countries. In this sense, a unique opportunity for countries like India or South Africa to play a more leading role in international affairs is missed.

Often the role of Africa is sadly overlooked. Yet, with 18 members, it is by far the most important region within the Commonwealth, and many of the organization's policies directly focus on Africa. As is so often the case in international organizations, Africa is on many occasions the core focus of attention, but the African voice or perspective is often missing. As Sophie Harman and William Brown have indicated with regard to academic debates: 'Africa is at the core of empirical understandings of international relations but often at the periphery of theoretical insights.'⁴³

⁴⁰ Stephen Chan, 'An ornithology of secretaries-general: the Commonwealth and its leadership', *The Round Table* 94: 380, 2005, pp. 325–37.

⁴¹ David Brooks, 'The thought leader', *New York Times*, 16 Dec. 2013.

⁴² Commonwealth Secretariat, *A Commonwealth of the people*.

⁴³ Sophie Harman and William Brown, 'In from the margin? The changing character of Africa in International Relations', *International Affairs* 89: 1, 2013, p. 87.

How relevant is the Commonwealth to global governance in the twenty-first century? External challenges and fragmentation

Whereas the previous section of this article focused on internal matters and their challenges, this section looks at the complex and very competitive external environment in which the Commonwealth operates. This environment is increasingly characterized by heterogeneous forms of 'global governance', involving a wide variety of goals, actors and structures. Global issues and responses are afflicted by fragmentation, duplication and many other 'pathologies'. The fact that the Commonwealth touches on many different topics makes it a participant, whether explicit or implicit, in a growing network of hypercomplexity. Within such dense networks, four sets of increasingly important groups of actors can be identified as potential partners or, indeed rivals: other international organizations, other 'Commonwealths', regional organizations and global policy networks.

Other international organizations

As a small organization, the Commonwealth Secretariat has sought from the very beginning to establish meaningful interactions with other international organizations. With regard to the UN, the Commonwealth is a firm promoter of UN norms in fields such as human rights, climate change, and peace and security, many of which it has endorsed in its principles and declarations. All Commonwealth members also belong to the UN, and the Secretariat has observer status at the UN General Assembly. Since 1983, the Commonwealth has funded and administered a Joint Office for Commonwealth Permanent Missions to the United Nations for eleven small Commonwealth member states. A similar initiative was taken in 2011 for Geneva. Even in a field where one might least expect the Commonwealth to act, that of peace and security, it has been supportive of UN actions. The Commonwealth has participated in every high-level meeting between the UN secretary general and the heads of regional and other intergovernmental organizations since their inception in 1994.⁴⁴ The Commonwealth's good offices have been used in conflicts in Swaziland, Tonga, Guyana, Fiji and the Maldives, places distant from and, not surprisingly, of little geopolitical interest to most Great Powers in the world. In respect of SIDS, the Commonwealth is also successfully collaborating with the World Bank, having set up a joint task force on small states. The collaboration between different international organizations is an interesting way to deal with fragmentation in global governance. The commonwealths have to network to survive: which of them has the greatest networking potential?

⁴⁴ UNU-CRIS, *Capacity survey: regional and other intergovernmental organizations in the maintenance of peace and security* (Bruges: UNU-CRIS, 2008), http://www.cris.unu.edu/fileadmin/user_upload/capacity_survey.pdf, accessed 14 July 2014; Philippe de Lombaerde, Francis Baert and Tania Felicio, eds, *The United Nations and the regions: Third World report on regional integration* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

Other commonwealths

The Commonwealth has to take into account other post-colonial 'commonwealths', namely its Lusophone, Spanish and French equivalents. Innovation and competition between commonwealths has led to their evolution, even their creation in the case of the Lusophone commonwealth, established when Mozambique was admitted to the anglophone Commonwealth on the return to the fold of South Africa under Nelson Mandela in the mid-1990s. The relationship with the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) merits particular attention.⁴⁵ Rwanda left the OIF before being admitted to the anglophone Commonwealth at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, in the last decade, the Commonwealth and OIF have embarked on extensive collaboration. For several years now, they have organized joint meetings in the margins of the G20. Another very important example is the Hubs and Spokes programme, whereby they collaborate with the EU and the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific states) in order to provide capacity and training for ACP countries in international trade negotiations. So, somewhat ironically, one of the more successful Commonwealth projects is supported by EU funds.

Regional organizations

Closely related to the rise of global international organizations is the proliferation of regional organizations. The Commonwealth faces increasing competition from these organizations. Yet care needs to be taken in making this point, for regional cooperation varies from region to region. Regional organizations in Africa, the Caribbean and Europe are particularly well coordinated and therefore do present a challenge to the Commonwealth. Clearly, in the case of Cyprus, Malta and the UK, the EU is the more important organization. The continuous crisis about the UK's membership in and attitudes towards the EU occasionally generates discussions about the UK leaving the EU and taking a stronger position in the Commonwealth, although the prospect is illusory. For the African countries, there are many regional organizations, including the African Union, the Southern African Development Community and the Economic Community of West African States, to name but a few. Countries such as South Africa and Nigeria prefer these forums over the Commonwealth. In the Caribbean, there are also other alternatives to the Commonwealth for collective action. However, we note that in this region the Commonwealth is often relied upon to amplify communications from other, less visible, regional entities. For the South and South-East Asian and South Pacific members there are fewer alternatives to the Commonwealth. Poorer Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or the Pacific micro-states struggle to get their voices heard on the world stage. For them, the Commonwealth has clear

⁴⁵ There is an overlap in membership, with several countries belonging to both organizations: Cameroon, Canada, Cyprus, Dominica, Ghana, Mauritius, Rwanda, St Lucia and Vanuatu. See Timothy M. Shaw, 'Comparative commonwealths: an overlooked feature of global governance', *Third World Quarterly* 31: 2, 2010, pp. 333–46.

benefits. But it is also through its Commonwealth membership that the Anglophone world has shown an interest in Sri Lanka, otherwise nothing more than an exotic holiday destination in the Indian Ocean.

Global policy networks

Finally, the rise of social networks in our daily lives is also reflected in international relations. We observe the growing relevance of global policy networks in the global governance of development, trade, health and the environment. The Commonwealth has been a network for many years: on one level it can be seen as a pioneer in this regard. But in a world where technological change has seen dramatic changes in the way both organizations and individuals conduct their affairs, it must be aware of the danger of falling behind bigger organizations and institutions. There is some concern that the Commonwealth is not 'networking' enough.

Diane Stone identifies five kinds of global policy networks on the basis of their changing influence over different stages of policy-making. First, there are the transnational advocacy coalitions consisting of NGOs and activists. Second, there are business-related networks such as CBC. Third, there are transnational executive networks where government officials play a central role, such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). Fourth, there is the group of global public policy networks to which the Global Water Partnership, for instance, belongs. Finally, there are knowledge networks and epistemic communities which present scholarly argumentation and scientific justification for evidence-based policy formulation.⁴⁶ Functions of global policy networks can be related to participation, on the one hand, or to global governance, on the other. Networks may or may not include non-state actors, civil society and business enterprises. From the governance aspect, networks are involved in different stages of the policy process. They set global agendas, develop standards or coordinate knowledge dissemination.

The Commonwealth Secretariat may influence policy but is not a policy-maker. This point relates to recent concern about the Commonwealth's visibility. It is not so much a source of new ideas as an intermediate diffuser of ideas that originate somewhere else, for example in the UN or the World Bank. In this regard, more active involvement in current global policy networks would be advisable. Perhaps it would even be worth initiating new networks on core Commonwealth concerns. This would require a renewed activism from the secretary general more in the spirit of Sonny Ramphal, who can be seen as a global citizen, active in idea diffusion through his participation in a series of blue-ribbon global commissions when the 'Third World' was a central feature of global governance, and in his acting as co-chair of the post-Cold War Commission on Global Governance, leading to its 1995 report *Our global neighbourhood*.

⁴⁶ Diane Stone, 'Global public policy, transnational policy communities, and their networks', *Policy Studies Journal* 36: 1, 2008, pp. 19–38.

Conclusion: Commonwealth futures post-2015

If Susan Strange is right and international organizations never seem to die, we should at least make better use of them. This article has revolved around the central question of whether successful Commonwealth reform is possible. A new round of lofty reform proposals will not change much. Concrete action plans are necessary. The passage of the Commonwealth Secretariat's half-century should be used to reflect on the organization's future, not to celebrate its past. It can allow the Commonwealth to take advantage of its strengths—informality, hybridity and its network character—to advance global governance by advancing relevant hybrid coalitions.

As the global South rises and other political economies in the North Atlantic and Pacific stabilize, so the Commonwealth could ride the wave of rebalancing, addressing itself to the many and disparate issues of concern to its members: culture, democracy, economics, ecology, education, health, the particular needs of islands and so on. The rise of the global South, which seems to us a more significant trend than the celebrated rising economic potentialities of the BRICS, challenges the orthodox understanding of global governance and will put more emphasis on the advancement of relevant hybrid coalitions of actors. The Commonwealth was a social network long before the concept had true meaning; it is now time for the Commonwealth to network more. It should find the right partners within the public and private sector to advance human development. The Secretariat should again become a global player capable of punching above its weight. This can only be done with clear and dynamic leadership.

In 2015, member states can elect a new secretary general. They should seek a dynamic and visionary candidate who can inspire people and knows how to deal with the media. But, more importantly, it should be a man or woman who reasserts the Secretariat as a useful arena of creation and reflection. Its staffing and budget will remain very limited, so it will need a clear-cut programme of action executed by a dynamic team to save it from irrelevance. Strengthening the human rights unit would be a start. Similarly, concrete deeds with regard to the environment, food and climate change in the SIDS spirit that comfortably fits the Commonwealth agenda would strongly mark new ways for the Commonwealth to be a diffuser, not merely a receiver, of ideas.

If member states fail to make these choices, they will be giving the Commonwealth the kiss of death. We have shown that owing to its precarious nature and informal working methods, the Commonwealth is truly an organization driven by its member states. This is not necessarily a bad thing. We are living in a time of enormous opportunities for dynamic states. Classical middle powers like Australia and Canada can play an increasingly prominent role in overcoming North–South divides. But to an even greater extent, African and Asian states could find in the Commonwealth a vehicle through which to play a truly global role and enrich discussions with new insights. The Commonwealth is not, and should not be, a colonial white men's club. Indeed, the ABC countries are increasingly

multicultural and multiracial. We are in dire need of new recipes for global governance in order to advance novel forms of international relations, the basis for post-2015 contributions to global governance.⁴⁷ The year 2015 should be the year in which the Commonwealth finds a new tune. And like the famous jazz standard—that unique wider Atlantic *mélange* of styles and influences—‘It don’t mean a thing, if it ain’t got that swing.’

⁴⁷ Timothy M. Shaw and Lucian M. Ashworth, ‘Commonwealth perspectives on International Relations’, *International Affairs* 85: 5, Sept. 2010, pp. 1149–65.