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The Globalization Project of the Commonwealth

Introduction

For close to a century, scholars and practitioners have pondered on the status of the British Commonwealth. Was it intended to be a superstate or a supranational organization? Should it be classified as a regional organization or an international association? Was it to be “a (single) multi-sovereign state or a league of nations”?¹ Was it best seen as a “club” (of states) or a “family” (of nations)?² If the metaphor or model to hold the idea was illusive, diplomatic practice within the body simply befuddled students of diplomacy. How was it the case that “members” of the Commonwealth were neither “foreign” to each other (and therefore their representatives were called “high commissioners,” not ambassadors), nor were they “domestic”?³

There is a sense that these things were easier to sort through in earlier times. This was an age—in the first half of the twentieth century—when membership of the Commonwealth was mostly limited to white-ruled parts of the British Empire. This was a time when the economies of white settler commonwealth—or the “inner/old commonwealth,” as it is sometimes called—were integrated, despite the great physical distances between them.⁴ But, looking back, even at that time, questions hovered over the body as to whether its membership was racially or politically determined?

Understanding the Commonwealth has seemed to rely more on an invented tradition of fealty and volunteerism than on any cartesian logic around, say, a prototype of globalization. If anything, its features became even more fuzzy in the years immediately following the Second World War, when Britain’s global standing waned. Beginning with India in 1947, as Commonwealth membership expanded to include Britain’s former colonies and was eventually extended to even non-British-ruled places like Mozambique, which joined in 1995, the rationale for its existence as well as the criteria for its membership has been puzzling. Could the Commonwealth, with its 56 constituents,

1 Quincy Wright, “British Commonwealth Relations Conference,” *American Journal of International Law* 28, no. 1 (1934): 122–125.

2 K. C. Wheare, “Is the British Commonwealth Withering Away?,” *American Political Science Review* 44, no. 3 (1950): 545–555; H. Duncan Hall, “The British Commonwealth,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 99, no. 4 (1955): 251–258.

3 Wheare, “Is the British Commonwealth Withering Away?”

4 Francine McKenzie, *Redefining the Bonds of Commonwealth, 1939–1948* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

spread across the world, be characterized as a “region”—and so be classified as a regional organization? But although the Commonwealth may not uniformly meet the territorial contiguity requirement implied in the idea of regionality, several members of the Commonwealth share something more intimate than common space in a geographical region—they share the same nominal “head of state” in the form of the British monarch.

It is not the intent of this chapter to resolve the puzzle of the Commonwealth’s definition, which will remain a work in progress. However, through a historical analysis of its evolution and the changes in—and of—the Commonwealth, we aim to contextualize its character and explain why it seems fatally mortgaged to Britain’s own international fortunes, even though the country’s global power has diminished.

As we will show, the Commonwealth emerged from the key form of late nineteenth/early twentieth-century globalization, that is to say imperialism. The Commonwealth was created to reconcile the interests of an imperial hegemon, Britain, and the nascent white settler colonies as self-governing member states of the British Empire. These places were said to enjoy “Dominion status” within the empire—the term signified a looser, less subordinate relationship than that with a “colony.”⁵ This near-biblical term *dominion* however fell into disuse after the Commonwealth Summit in London in 1948.

After the Second World War, as the British—and other late-imperial powers—lost their respective empires, the sovereign-centered form of political rule was truly globalized. However, newly independent states could only assert their sovereignty in the ever-tightening space of Cold War bipolar politics. Here, multilateral avenues such as the Non-Aligned Movement provided a maneuvering platform. In this period, the Commonwealth slowly transformed itself into a vessel that was supportive of the project of postcolonial sovereignty and became a champion of Third World causes, even though this was to cause considerable disquiet both in Britain and in the one-time Dominions. With the ending of the Cold War, the global political entanglements that had contributed to the Commonwealth’s postcolonial turn and its spiky edge were either resolved or simply collapsed into a singular economic category of neoliberal globalization. Ever since, the Commonwealth has struggled to reinvent itself despite now claiming to represent a multinational and multiracial community of 2.4 billion people spread across the globe.

The discussion in this chapter proceeds on the lines of these shifts. The first section discusses the origins and development of the Commonwealth before the Second World War. In the second section, we trace the change of the Commonwealth from an imperial commonwealth to a postcolonial commonwealth. The third section discusses the recasting of the Commonwealth in the post-Cold War period. We conclude the chapter

5 Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

with thoughts on the prospects for the future of the Commonwealth in the increasingly crowded traffic lanes populated by international organizations.

Responding to the Global Condition

The term *commonwealth* has fifteenth-century roots as an English equivalent of the Latin term *res publica*, meaning the “public good.” This was the sense in which it was used by social contract theorists like Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704), both of whom thought of commonwealth as an ideal form of polity. Indeed, Oliver Cromwell’s (1599–1658) ill-fated English republic was designated as a commonwealth—with Cromwell accruing to himself the title of “Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England.” In the embryonic United States, the term *commonwealth* was used to describe the polities encompassed in the constitutions of four states—Virginia (1776), Pennsylvania (1776), Massachusetts (1780), and Kentucky (1850). However, a more modern usage reaches back to the late nineteenth century—and this is the context in which it will be considered in what follows.

The conception of the British Commonwealth—as used in these pages—emerged at the confluence of several worries over the durability of the British Empire as an idea and as a fact. The first was a worry over the rising costs of imperial defense.⁶ An increasingly restless global empire could no longer be run on the proverbial shoestring—as Britain had done through a policy of indirect governance. Further, these concerns were linked to eugenicist worries over degeneration of the British “stock.” Simply put, the (so-called) “best Britons” were said to be migrating to the wider Anglo-Saxon world to escape deteriorating social conditions in a rapidly industrializing Britain. The wider white empire—triumphally called “Greater Briton”—was thought of as an extension of the “home country,” as England was nostalgically known. Hence, the British Empire needed greater military resources and newer forms of political, cultural, and economic engagement with those who could provide them, that is to say, the white settler colonies. Consequently, the Imperial Federation League, which was founded in 1884, championed schemes of creating an empire-wide common polity with organized defense and trade. In this understanding, the category of race became a crucial identifier of belonging and underpinned the performance of white-centered power. So, to an Australian audience in 1884, Lord Rosebery, who became British prime minister the very next year, called the empire a “Commonwealth of Nations,” which presided over a “congress of races.”⁷

6 Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain—Empire and the Future of World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

7 Quoted in Saul Dubow and Richard Drayton, “Introduction: The Commonwealth in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies*, eds. Saul Dubow and Richard Drayton (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3.

The Dominions were, however, worried about such federalist visions for empire. Increasingly drawn to the local, as opposed to the cosmopolitan, they objected to the possible interference in their “internal matters”—the latter was coded language for the racial policies of the settler colonies. As a result, the idea of asserting their “autonomy” as Dominions as a *conditio sine qua non* for their very existence became a byword for the idea of “White Australia,” “White New Zealand,” “White Canada,” and “White South Africa.”⁸ So, for example, the South African politician John X. Merriman (1841–1926) used the term *British Commonwealth* in 1887 as a call for creating a decentralized empire. In the speech, he railed against the “sentimental philandering” of those seeking imperial unity, which combined “sentiment and business.” This view of the future of the empire, Merriman argued, was primarily concerned with retaining British dominance over the Dominions.⁹

These contrasting—yet curiously, complementary—worries on the transition moment from empire to commonwealth spilled into the twentieth century and are best represented in the writings of two of the most important thinkers and practitioners of commonwealth affairs: Lionel Curtis and Jan Smuts.

The son of a clergyman and trained at Haileybury and Oxford, Curtis was a leading member of the Round Table group—a thought-collective of like-minded young idealists who would come to have a strong influence on British foreign policy in this period.¹⁰ Curtis would propose the creation of an “organic union” of the empire and conceptualized the “British Commonwealth” as a kind of sacramental supracommunity. Embedded in the social contractual tradition, the state was said to be an association of self-interested participating members who came together to ensure their basic rights to life and property. Curtis, however, contrasted this narrow understanding against the Commonwealth, which he conceived of as a body formed through a sense of duty owed to others in a civic polity. Viewed in this way, the Commonwealth was an association of members who are to be joined together by the desire to ensure each other’s “well-being” instead of their own self-interests. Translated into international practice, the Commonwealth was meant to bring together members of the empire who were joined by a sense of duty toward each other and, *ipso facto*, to Britain and so to the Crown.¹¹

8 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

9 John Merriman, “The Closer Union of the Empire,” *The Nineteenth Century* 21 (1887): 507–516.

10 Andrea Bosco and Alex May, eds., *The Round Table, the Empire/Commonwealth, and British Foreign Policy* (London: Lothian Foundation Press, 1997).

11 See Alexander E. Davis, Vineet Thakur, and Peter Vale, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Funding of International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 32–34. Also see Gerald Studdert-Kennedy, “Political Science and Political Theology: Lionel Curtis, Federalism and India,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24, no. 2 (1996): 197–217.

While this vision hoped to advance the idea of an imperial federation, it was distinctive from earlier efforts to push the Commonwealth idea in this direction in one important way. While previous thinking invariably sought to secure a racial unity among the white-ruled parts of the empire—including Britain—Curtis wanted to include the nonwhite members of the empire into his schema. In this thinking, the idea of the Commonwealth implied that the white members owed a duty of upliftment toward the nonwhite members so that once they were “uplifted,” the latter could join the Commonwealth as equal members. This shift drew on elements of social Darwinism, adding to it the benefits of the practice of progressive education. India, which was seen as more “advanced” than other nonwhite colonies, was identified as the primary target for this schema. It was Curtis who first started using the term *British Commonwealth of Nations* in his two books, *The Problem of the Commonwealth* and *The Commonwealth of Nations*.¹²

The credit for taking the idea—and, indeed, the very term—*commonwealth* into the public realm goes to the Cambridge-trained South African leader, Smuts, who—although a general in the Boer War, which was fought against the British—became one of the most admired politicians in Britain.¹³ In a speech in May 1917, Smuts first used the term *British Commonwealth of Nations* not to signify imperial unity but to assert the cause of self-government in the Dominions.¹⁴ Here, the Commonwealth was to be a similar form to the League of Nations, a space where autonomous states came together to uphold the broad principles of interstate relations. In this view, members of the Commonwealth were connected to each other by a commitment to British values.

In the same remarks, he suggests “two potent factors” that were fundamental to the future of the Commonwealth.¹⁵ These were the hereditary British Crown and the Imperial Conference system—the latter had been developed as a deliberative organ since 1887. The first factor precluded the possibility of any form of republicanism becoming a feature of the Commonwealth—indeed, he explicitly says that “you cannot make a republic [... out of] the British Commonwealth of Nations.”¹⁶ The implication was that the Commonwealth, like the empire before it, had to be wrapped in the mysticism of the monarchy. *The Penguin Political Dictionary* published in 1939 was to record that in

12 Lionel Curtis, *The Problem of the Commonwealth* (London: Macmillan, 1915); Lionel Curtis, *The Commonwealth of Nations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Citizenship in the British Empire, and into the Mutual Relations of the Several Communities Thereof, Part I* (London: Macmillan, 1916).

13 Ronald Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 342–360.

14 J. C. Smuts, *Plans for a Better World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1945), 35.

15 Smuts, 40.

16 Smuts, 35.

the absence of any written constitution, the Crown was the essential “imponderabilia” for the Commonwealth.¹⁷

For Curtis, then, the British Commonwealth was to be an ever-expanding federation that aimed to protect and promote the British interests across the world; Smuts saw it as an organization of autonomous members joined together by common respect for British values, symbolized in the Crown. These two contesting yet complementary visions of Britain’s global reach underwrote the development of the Commonwealth during the interwar period. The Balfour Declaration (1926), which was later adopted through an act of the British parliament as the Statute of Westminster (1931), made the Dominions sovereign in their domestic affairs. As this autonomy was institutionalized, the Dominions readily cohered around the commonwealth idea as a particular genus of international organization. The Commonwealth spoke in a singular voice to the “outside” world in defense of British late-imperial interests.

Although there was some opposition to the Britishness from the Irish and the Afrikaner nationalists, despite these murmurings, the idea of the British Commonwealth as a method of organizing the international grew in strength to the point of an informal military alliance. Except for Eire, all members voluntarily supported the British decision to go to war—although in South Africa, the decision came down to just seven votes in an all-white, minority parliament.

But at its core, and often missed in its memorialization, was the fact that the Commonwealth emanated a white-centered political vision that was notionally based on “Britishness,” but the hidden marker of which was race. Nonwhite thinkers and politicians, most notably the Indian politician V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, critiqued the racial ideas of both Curtis and Smuts and advocated for the British Commonwealth to become a nonracialized polity.¹⁸

The Commonwealth was actualized, as Smuts had also noted, through irregular Imperial Conferences (called Colonial Conferences before 1907 and changed to Heads of Government Conferences in 1944), where leaders from the Dominions and India gathered to deliberate on world affairs. To Smuts, this gave the organization a character of a “mini League of Nations.”¹⁹

In addition, the Commonwealth served as a platform for several functional organizations on which the members cooperated, from the regulation of the infant aviation

17 Walter Theimer, *The Penguin Political Dictionary* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1939).

18 Hugh Tinker, “Color and Colonization,” *The Round Table* 60, no. 240 (1970): 405–416; Vineet Thakur, *India’s First Diplomat: V. S. Srinivasa Sastri and the Making of Liberal Internationalism* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

19 For an early debate on whether the Empire had become a “mini League of Nations,” see the exchange between Jan Smuts and Tej Bahadur Sapru in the 1923 Imperial Conference in Vineet Thakur, “Liberal, Liminal and Lost: India’s First Diplomats and the Narrative of Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45, vol. 2 (2017): 232–258.

industry to the organization of global postal affairs to the importance of forestry as an international agri-business. Further, the 1932 Imperial Economic Conference, held in Ottawa, created a commonwealth-wide trading bloc, which removed barriers to trade under an “Imperial Preference” system. At the time, it was “the most extensive functioning system of tariff discrimination in the world.”²⁰

The emergence of the Commonwealth as a viable international actor needs to be placed in the global context of this period. The interwar years were volatile ones. Empires had crumbled into nation-states with increasing assertion of self-determination and in which the notion of sovereignty was used as rationale both for nationalism and war-making. Efforts to prevent conflict by containing (or pooling) sovereignty were manifested through the reimaginations of the political at the international level. These reimaginations witnessed the propagation of ideas like world states, federations, and (the formation of) sovereign-centered international organizations like the League of Nations, which was established in 1920. In this contest between consecrating sovereignty and its containment, the British Commonwealth provided an effective example of compromise—little wonder that it was often seen as a valuable template for schemes of European as well as for world federations.²¹

But other implications accompanied the idea, too. Amid deepening uncertainty—not to mention insecurity—the notion and the fact of the Commonwealth cushioned the decline of Britain as a global hegemon and, simultaneously, provided some welcome stability in the international system. The recasting of the Commonwealth as idea and institution enabled Britain to retain a sense of imperial grandeur and purpose, which it had been steadily losing to the new powers in both the Atlantic and the Pacific arenas. It is important also to remember that the establishment of the Commonwealth was a response to an ancient British fear—a repeat of the original act of imperial secession, the American War of Independence. As Duncan Bell shows, the telos of the Commonwealth idea was the return of America into the same political fold to form an Anglo-American utopia.²² America’s usurping of global hegemony was more reassuring to the British, instead of their country turning into a revengeful revisionist power in an uncertain international system.

20 McKenzie, *Redefining the Bonds of Commonwealth*, 14.

21 Lionel Curtis, *Civitas Dei: The Commonwealth of God* (London: Macmillan, 1938); Clarence K Streit, *Union Now: A Proposal for a Federal Union of the Democracies of the North Atlantic* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1937).

22 Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

The Commonwealth Globalization Project in Practice

Accounting for 75 percent of the population of the empire, as the British Indian mandarin William Marris once argued, India put the word *empire* into the *British Empire*.²³ So, its potential “loss” to Britain and to the empire on its 1947 independence would present a decided setback to Britain’s global prestige.

The independence of India was also decisive for the Commonwealth and its future since it marked the onset of the era of decolonization. In 1949, at the fourth Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference held in London, India agreed to remain part of the Commonwealth but only as a republic. This was a significant departure from an established norm: it was no longer a requirement that the British monarch should be the “head of state” of individual Commonwealth members. It was, however, agreed that the British monarch would become the head of the Commonwealth. Furthermore, the London meeting also agreed that the name of the organization, the British Commonwealth, would fall away—henceforth it was to be only known as the Commonwealth.

For all the retrospective claims of change and continuity that these shifts represented in international relations, for Britain they were important to save face domestically. Writing in 1958, the celebrated International Relations scholar Hedley Bull, an Australian, argued that the Commonwealth allowed the British to avoid acknowledging the “end of Empire.” By portraying itself as the moral end of the empire and not its defeat, the Commonwealth “enabled the British public to accept gracefully what they otherwise might not have accepted at all.” It allowed London to claim that “what is apparently defeat is really victory, that the disintegration of the Empire is the fulfilment of a deliberately willed policy of constructing a great association of free peoples.”²⁴

At the time, these changes were symbolic, and it seemed so for a decade thereafter. But with India’s independence, floodgates for change were opened over the long term. As more British colonies gained independence, the character of the Commonwealth changed—often decidedly so. In the early years, a chasm between white Commonwealth countries and the nonwhite countries in terms of their approach to racism, especially over the issue of apartheid, was avoided by agreeing not to discuss contentious “bilateral” issues. So, for instance, while India and South Africa engaged in an acrimonious diplomatic battle at the United Nations (UN) over apartheid, the Commonwealth Summits—which should have been an ideal platform to discuss such issues—simply avoided discussing the topic.²⁵ But with countries like Ghana (1957), Malaysia (1957), Sri Lanka

23 William Marris, “India and the English,” *The Round Table* 1, no. 1 (1908): 41–57.

24 Hedley Bull, “What is the Commonwealth,” *World Politics* 11, no. 4 (1959): 586.

25 Vineet Thakur, “The ‘Hardy Annual’: A History of India’s First UN Resolution,” *India Review* 16, no. 4 (2017): 401–429.

(1948), Pakistan (1947), Kenya (1963), and Nigeria (1960) joining the Commonwealth in quick succession, South Africa was increasingly challenged within its structures.²⁶

The shift away from a British-centered Commonwealth was increasingly visible. Indeed, the first shock had been when in the Suez Crisis of 1956 Britain's action did not find ready support from Commonwealth members. London had conducted no consultations with other Commonwealth members before launching a combined assault, together with France, on Gamal Nasser's Egypt. Australia and New Zealand tacitly supported the action, but the Canadian and Indian responses were sharply critical, to the extent that Lester Pearson, then the Canadian secretary of state for external affairs, thought that the Commonwealth was on the "verge of dissolution" over the issue.²⁷

From a once comfortable platform of an all-white community, the Commonwealth evolved into a vibrant political platform for decolonization and race issues, in which the former colonies played a significant role. The "winds of change," to borrow the moniker of Harold Macmillan's 1960 speech to South Africa's parliament, began to blow when the apartheid state withdrew from the Commonwealth a year later, after it became clear that its continued membership of the body would result in others leaving the Commonwealth. Britain's role within the Commonwealth was atrophying, and its own aspirations seemed increasingly linked to the European-wide project of economic integration. The complexion of the Commonwealth changed from a (British-centered) commonwealth to what might be called a postcolonial commonwealth.

Evolution of the Commonwealth Globalization Project

A key institutional development was the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965 at Marlborough House in London. The suggestion for its creation came from the Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah.²⁸ As the central office of the Commonwealth moved from Whitehall to Marlborough House, the Commonwealth acquired an identity quite separate from that of Britain and its government.²⁹ This independence was cautiously guarded by successive early secretary-generals, the Canadian Arnold Smith (1965–1975) and the Guyanese Shridath "Sonny" Ramphal (1975–1990). Gradually,

26 F. J. Nothling, "South Africa, Great Britain and the Commonwealth," in *History of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs 1927–1993*, ed. Tom Wheeler (Johannesburg: The South African Institute of International Affairs, 2005).

27 Rolf Pfeiffer, "New Zealand and the Suez crisis of 1956," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 21, no. 1 (1993): 126–152; Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 171.

28 W. David McIntyre, "Britain and the creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28, no. 1 (2000): 135–158.

29 Although the government department charged with running British foreign policy continued to be called, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

the Commonwealth Secretariat gained an autonomous personality and became the prime vehicle through which the agenda of the Commonwealth was set. In so doing, it became a spatial entrepreneur, a key actor within the Commonwealth that negotiated the organization's place and pace of maneuver between the stifling politics of the Cold War, on the one hand, and the resurgent promise of postcolonial independence, on the other.

Even within the United Kingdom, the increasing non-British centrality of the post-colonial Commonwealth was increasingly visible through what Ruth Craggs calls an emergence of new "subaltern geographies."³⁰ Starting from 1971, the Commonwealth Conferences moved from London to venues in the Commonwealth countries in different corners of the world. Establishing the proverbial clear blue water between the Commonwealth and Britain was helped by the power of branding and the development of an operating vocabulary within the organization and beyond. And so, the abbreviation CHOGM (for Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) developed a life of its own in the nomenclature of international relations.

From an imperial-minded and white-centered club in the interwar years, the Commonwealth became one of the most prominent antiracist organizations of the Cold War. The 1971 Commonwealth Conference, which was held in Singapore, committed the organization for the first time to principles of self-determination and nonracialism. These positions were reflected in the Commonwealth's policy—and, indeed, advocacy—on the issues of Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa. This pitted the "old" Commonwealth, often led by Britain, and the newly independent states sharply against each other. The latter confronted Britain at the Commonwealth Conferences over the country's tacit and explicit support for white rule in Southern Africa.³¹ There were two occasions—first in 1965 when Britain decided against using force to annul the Universal Declaration of Independence by Ian Smith's white settler government in Rhodesia and later, in 1971, when Britain decided to resume arms sales to the apartheid regime—when the Commonwealth came dangerously close to breaking apart over the mounting quandaries in Southern Africa.³²

As Ian Sanjay Patel shows in an excellent history of postwar immigration to Britain, a drawn-out end of empire in the 1950s and 1960s and its domestic fallouts further shaped the country's approach to the Commonwealth. In a moment of supreme imperial confidence, the 1948 British Nationality Act had granted sustained rights of entry and residence in the UK to hundreds of millions of Commonwealth citizens. It even gave them the right to register as "Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies"—the

30 Ruth Craggs, "Subaltern geopolitics and the post-colonial Commonwealth, 1965–1990," *Political Geography*, no. 65 (2018): 46–56.

31 Philip Murphy, *The Empire's New Clothes: The Myth of the Commonwealth* (London: Hurst, 2021), 11.

32 Mélanie Torrent, "A Commonwealth Approach to Decolonization," *Études anglaises* 65, no. 3 (2012): 356.

primary form of British citizenship—after residing for 12 months in the UK.³³ By the mid-1960s, as the new British citizens flocked to Britain from the (former) colonies, the folly of this hubris became apparent. A backlash against migrants from (what was increasingly called) the “new commonwealth” was seen as a wakeup call from the comforting nostalgia about the Commonwealth being a substitute for empire. The right-wing British politician Enoch Powell, who once aspired to become a viceroy of India,³⁴ was to claim that the British Commonwealth was “a great farce.”³⁵ For conservative British politicians, according to the historian Philip Murphy, “the Commonwealth itself had become the real threat to British interests—both in Southern Africa, where it seemed hellbent on replacing stable, pro-Western regimes with Marxist dictatorships, and at home, where it became synonymous with non-white immigration.”³⁶ Consequently, Britain’s entry into the European Community in 1973 must be judged as a deliberate move to downgrade relations with the Commonwealth, which left British supporters in the Commonwealth like Australia and New Zealand feeling abandoned.³⁷

As Britain retreated from the Commonwealth in the 1970s, or at least was no longer at its center, the organization was required to reposition itself in an ever-globalizing world. In the conceptual, as well as physical, cartography of the Cold War, defined by its binaries of East-West and North-South, the Commonwealth fostered a cross-spatial vision of globalization. As a platform that cut through the East-West and (the increasingly prevalent) North-South divides, the Commonwealth seemed ideally positioned to blunt the Cold War mode of antagonistic politics. The response was to advocate for the interests of small states and islands.³⁸ In 1971, it launched the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), which promoted South-to-South transfer of expertise. This idea was first proposed by Arnold Smith, the founding secretary-general, and was initially opposed by the “old” Commonwealth. But, as with many similar initiatives, it found support from the newer members.

In these years, the Commonwealth worked to secure favorable trade terms for African, Pacific and Caribbean countries associated with the European Economic Community in the buildup to the Lomé Convention (1975). Furthermore, it provided support to newly independent small states in the Caribbean in the 1970s—and, later, in early 1980s—with

33 Ian Sanjay Patel, *We’re Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire* (London: Verso, 2022).

34 Ian Sanjay Patel, “Enoch Powell’s Altered World,” *London Review of Books Blog*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2018/april/enoch-powell-s-altered-world>.

35 S. R. Ashton, “British Government Perspectives on the Commonwealth, 1964–71: An Asset or a Liability?,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31, no. 1 (2007): 74.

36 Murphy, *Empire’s New Clothes*, 12.

37 Dubow and Drayton, “Introduction,” 2.

38 W. David McIntyre, *The Significance of the Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

expertise in diplomacy, economy, and regional cooperation.³⁹ The development of these new initiatives, or the second-order globalization projects, as the editors of this volume call them, added tangible benefits to the Commonwealth's membership. This was a further instance in which the Commonwealth was at odds with the national interests of Britain. An assessment by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1972, as Britain anticipated an entry into the European Economic Community, noted that the country's key interest was in maintaining economic ties with the "old" Commonwealth—that is to say, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada—and with other members like India, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore, and Zambia in a "second tier."⁴⁰

One of the key features of the Commonwealth was—as it continues to be—vigilance around the issue of national sovereignty. While the integrationist movement in Cold War Europe signaled that a goal of international organizations was to share sovereignty, this was not the direction of travel in postcolonial states. Having recently achieved their independence, they resisted any form of intervention in their domestic affairs. This reluctance raised charges of hypocrisy of the Commonwealth's position on this particular issue. On the one hand, it was the leading advocate for change in Rhodesia and South Africa, while, on the other hand, it looked the other way when human rights issues arose among its own members. This was to be the case until 1987, when Fiji was expelled following two successive coups d'état—the second of which deposed the British monarch as the "Queen of Fiji."

This said, the Commonwealth remained watchful in its concern to help settle—by peace or by pressure—difficult conflicts. One such was the deteriorating situation in South Africa, which, as already noted, was a former member of the organization. With self-determination and antiracism as two key sources of energy within the organization, the issue was especially important to the Commonwealth's international role. In 1986, it made purposeful interventions into opening negotiations for the end of apartheid. This happened in the aftermath of a Commonwealth Summit that was held in the Bahamas that had witnessed a deep division over the issue of further sanctions against the increasingly beleaguered apartheid state. It was decided to send a group of luminaries from the Commonwealth to South Africa to take forward nascent discussions between the minority government and the majority opposition, including the exiled movements. The Eminent Persons Group (EPG), led by a former president of Nigeria and a former Australian prime minister, came close to drawing the parties into talks.

For most international organizations, the fall of the Berlin Wall presented new challenges. The Commonwealth was no exception. The ending of bipolar rivalry made the Non-Aligned Movement, which provided the ideological core of the postcolonial Commonwealth, increasingly superfluous. With the end of white minority rule in

39 Torrent, "A Commonwealth Approach to Decolonization," 357.

40 Ashton, "British Government Perspectives on the Commonwealth," 91.

Zimbabwe in 1980 and in South Africa in 1994, the Commonwealth seemed to lose its leitmotif. Although its membership bridged the North-South and East-West divides, declarations like Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" seemed to render the Commonwealth without a calling.

Faced with this, the Commonwealth sought to recast itself. This was not easy. As Tim Shaw has argued, while the Commonwealth seemed in advance of organizations like the UN and World Bank during the Cold War, the directionless inertia of the 1990s compelled it to mimic the neoliberal "good governance" template set by the international financial institutions and championed in Washington and London.⁴¹ When it came to the issue of aid, the Commonwealth increasingly took on a "techno-functionalist role."⁴² Society-centered conceptions of human development were discarded for the neoliberal model of development. The Commonwealth Development Council (CDC), for instance, considered good governance defined as "well-administered" states with "sound general economic policies" as crucial factors for aid.⁴³ Furthermore, as Peter Vale and David Black highlight, even understandings of political values such as democracy were subjected to provisions of "technical assistance and capacity building for the legal and institutional underpinnings of democracy."⁴⁴

After years of distancing itself from the Commonwealth, the British government once again became proactive in Commonwealth affairs in early 1990. The Commonwealth was now being recast as a vehicle for the promotion of democracy, the protection of human rights, and the advancement of market reforms. As the conflicts in Southern Africa neared their end, the Harare Declaration (1991) provided an opportune moment for Britain to again throw the spotlight on those who had been severely condemnatory of South Africa but denied human rights in their own countries. The declaration pledged the Commonwealth to "protection of fundamental values of the Commonwealth," which included "democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government."⁴⁵ Pursuant of these aims, the Commonwealth established a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) in 1995 to monitor violations of such values and to recommend ameliorative measures. The CMAG, as Philip Murphy argues, was a fundamental departure for the Commonwealth as its

41 Timothy M. Shaw, "Globalization, Anti-Globalization and the Commonwealth(s)," *The Round Table* 92, no. 369 (2003): 235–248.

42 Ian Taylor, "Legitimization and De-legitimization within a Multilateral Organization: South Africa and the Commonwealth," *Politikon* 27, no. 1 (2000): 51–72.

43 Taylor, "Legitimization and De-legitimization," 66.

44 Peter Vale and David Black, *The Prodigal Returns: The Commonwealth and South Africa, Past and Future* (Bellville: Centre for Southern African Studies, 1994), 19.

45 The Commonwealth, "Harare Declaration, 1991," accessed April 2, 2023, <https://thecommonwealth.org/harare-declaration-1991>.

members had historically been opposed to any intrusions into their sovereignty.⁴⁶ In the event, the lofty ideals of the Harare Declaration were hamstrung in their operation as the CMAG is only able to recommend action on worst offenders. In the post-Cold War period, the Commonwealth has at various times expelled Nigeria (1995–1999), Pakistan (1999–2004 and 2007–08), Zimbabwe (2002–03, left the Commonwealth), and Fiji (2000 and 2004–2014) for violation of democratic principles.

In one aspect, however, the Commonwealth continues its Cold War legacy: advocacy of small states. Of the total 42 countries in the world under the category of “small states,” 33 are members of the Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth Secretariat continues to provide these with economic, diplomatic, and electoral expertise on issues relating to democracy and development.⁴⁷

From an organization that admitted members only from within the former British Empire, the Commonwealth has revised its membership criterion to include any willing country that has a historic connection with an existing Commonwealth member. As we have seen, Mozambique was the first such country to join, which it did in 1995. Rwanda (2009), Togo (2022), and Gabon (2022) are other such members. This makes the Commonwealth an important organizational avenue for smaller countries. Indeed, the Commonwealth Charter—which is a kind of mission statement in managerial speak—celebrates the organization as “a recognized intergovernmental champion of small states, advocating for their special needs; providing policy advice on political, economic and social development issues; and delivering technical assistance.”⁴⁸

With economics, not politics, being judged the key driver of world politics in the post-Cold War period, the Commonwealth has also attempted to position itself as a key economic actor. The Commonwealth Secretariat’s own reports highlight its economic potential. In 2016, the intra-Commonwealth trade was estimated at USD 560 billion, which was 20 percent of the total trade of these countries with the world.⁴⁹ While the sheer numbers may look impressive, most of this trading capacity is limited to half a dozen states—the United Kingdom, Canada, India, Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia.⁵⁰ Other 50 states of the Commonwealth, including large countries like South Africa and Nigeria, contribute less than one-sixth of the total intra-Commonwealth

46 Murphy, *Empire’s New Clothes*, 37.

47 The Commonwealth, “Small States,” accessed April 2, 2023, <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-work/small-states>.

48 The Commonwealth, “Commonwealth Charter,” accessed April 2, 2023, <https://thecommonwealth.org/charter>.

49 The Commonwealth, “Strengthening the Commonwealth Advantage: Trade, Technology, Governance,” *Commonwealth Trade Review* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018).

50 Sangeeta Khorana and Inmaculada Martinez-Zarzoso, “Trade Governance and Intra-Commonwealth Trade,” *International Trade Working Paper*, no. 4 (2018): 19.

exports.⁵¹ The skewed distribution represented in these figures reflects historical and contemporary factors rather than any organizational bias in the trade ties. In other words, the volume of trade is not a function of any organizational push but rather a fact of mostly bilateral evolution of trade ties.

A key, often underappreciated, element of the Commonwealth however is its role as a civil society actor. The “unofficial commonwealth,” as it is called, contributes in both tangible and intangible ways to building a “better world.”⁵² Under the Commonwealth umbrella, there are 83 accredited professional organizations that work in specialist areas from higher education to technology, health, urban planning, and citizen participation. The Commonwealth Foundation, founded in 1966, serves as the intergovernmental civil society arm of the organization.

Even though three decades have passed since the Cold War ended, the Commonwealth has still to find a role for itself in an ever-complex world. Several issues plague its future—of these, we must signpost just two. First, the history of the Commonwealth suggests the organization has always struggled with the identity issue. In the first half of the twentieth century, it cohered with the idea of white imperial identity. In those times, Britain, as a hegemon in the organization, directed it with some purpose and, at the same time, saved face with the loss of its empire. During the Cold War, the Commonwealth developed an identity against its own former self, positioning itself as an antiracism force and a champion of decolonization. Ramphal, who was elected as its secretary-general on account of his work in the Non-Aligned Movement,⁵³ once argued that his work was cut out to make the Commonwealth into a “negation of empire.”⁵⁴

Surely it is an exaggeration, one might argue, but there is no doubt that the Commonwealth Secretariat was supported by (and supported) key countries in the most pressing cause of the twentieth century, namely *race*. But the end of the Cold War, and more especially the liberation of the countries of Southern Africa, robbed the Commonwealth of this vital mission.

As it has attempted to align itself with the zero point of ideology—namely, good governance—the Commonwealth, for all its global reach and its long history, has weakly mimicked several other international organizations.

Second, the place of the former global hegemon, Britain, remains unclear in the unfolding of the Commonwealth story. After a brief replunging into its affairs in the early 1990s, Britain decisively allied itself with American wars in the Middle East in

51 Murphy, *Empire's New Clothes*, 207.

52 Timothy M. Shaw, “The Commonwealth(s) and Global Governance,” *Global Governance* 10, no. 4 (2004): 499–516.

53 Shridath Ramphal, Transcript of the interview by Sue Onslow with Shridath Ramphal (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, November 23, 2013), <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/5900/1/Shridath%20Ramphal%20Transcript%201.pdf>.

54 Torrent, “A Commonwealth Approach to Decolonization,” 347.

the 2000s. With the onset of the fracas over Brexit, it conveniently rediscovered the Commonwealth narrative. The campaign itself often harkened back to the ties with the old, white Commonwealth but, paradoxically, also pointed to the potential that the Commonwealth offered as a replacement for the European Union (EU) market.⁵⁵ These moves suggested that elites in Britain believed that the country could effortlessly pick up its Commonwealth connections. But these hopes were dashed when the responses to these entreaties were merely routine and considered secondary to global trading regimes. The first visit that the British prime minister Theresa May made after the Brexit decision was to India. During the visit, she celebrated the Commonwealth connection, but her appeals were met with little enthusiasm.⁵⁶ Even key allies, such as Australia and New Zealand, have been skeptical of any renewed British pedaling of the Commonwealth. Sentiments aside, their political, strategic, and economic interests lie in the newly emerging area of the Indo-Pacific, in which Britain plays little role.

Hidden from the sight of politics and policy-makers, the Commonwealth has turned into a nostalgic association that once reflected Britain's imperial glory. That mythology has been recycled through the figure of Queen Elizabeth II, whose long reign as the head of the Commonwealth kept the memory of Britain's global reach alive. But this is not embraced by a new generation of leaders. In 2021, Barbados became a parliamentary republic, removing the British monarch as its head of state—the first country to do so since 1987. Likewise, Jamaica, which is set to become a republic in 2025, promises to do the same. Although the British monarch is still the head of the Commonwealth “realm,” comprising 15 countries, the role is mostly symbolic. With Elizabeth's passing in 2022, it is likely that this practice will be disturbed, if not completely ruptured, notwithstanding that the title “Head of the Commonwealth” has been passed to her son, Charles.

Spatialization Effects of the Commonwealth Globalization Project

What does one then make of the postimperial Commonwealth? Despite the Commonwealth claiming to represent 56 countries and 2.4 billion people worldwide, it has become “a boutique organization,” to borrow the words of the former Commonwealth secretary Kamlesh Sharma, although he used it to argue the opposite.⁵⁷

Historians Saul Dubow and Richard Drayton argue that just as the Commonwealth's origins are hard to pinpoint, future historians may struggle to identify its demise.

55 Murphy, *Empire's New Clothes*, 198.

56 Dan Roberts, “Drive to Replace UK-EU Trade Links with Closer Ties to the Commonwealth,” *The Guardian*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/mar/10/drive-to-replace-eu-trade-links-with-closer-ties-to-commonwealth-economies>.

57 Quoted in, Murphy, *Empire's New Clothes*, 39.

It may already have passed on, for all we know.⁵⁸ As these pages have shown, the Commonwealth has attempted to define—and redefine—itsself at different moments in international history. By now it is a long-standing project that has weathered existential crises and lived many globalized lives. So, it may be premature to write its obituary.

The Commonwealth is not a regional organization in the classical sense, which is why its globalization project needs to be understood differently. In spatial terms, the cartography of the Commonwealth is shaped less by territorial and more by historical and ideological factors. As a result, its globalization project is not primarily about territory and trade—the regular indicators that are used to understand globalization as a teleology of integration. Historically, the Commonwealth attempted to first hold onto and later remake the social order that imperialism bequeathed a globalizing world. Its historical origins may be tied to Britain and its empire, but as we have noted in the preceding discussion, it would be a folly to consider Britain as its main driving vehicle. As the organization globalized in its form after the Second World War, its external project also took on the character of its internal transformation. This change signaled a transitioning out of its prewar life and form, to the extent that its postwar mandate was primarily to undo its prewar character. From 1990s onward, however, the lack of an ideological coherence—despite its neoliberal pretensions—has made it an organization that has once again turned onto itself. What we are suggesting here is that the Commonwealth's life is difficult to parse into first-order and second-order projects, or primary and secondary aims.

Finally, the Commonwealth belies categorizations in North-South, East-West, and linear periodic terms. From being a project of British imperialism to becoming a post-colonial vehicle to everything in between, it is neither a Northern nor a Southern project of globalization. But in perverse ways, in its messiness and inability to take a permanent form, the Commonwealth makes us attentive to the unsettledness of processes of globalization that always exist in between the South and the North, the East and the West, the past and the present. The Commonwealth ought to be best understood as process rather than project.

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⁵⁸ Dubow and Drayton, "Introduction," 7.

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