

Irrelevant? A modern makeover is all we need

The Empire may be history, but that doesn't mean there's no future for the Commonwealth

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The difficulties ahead of Delhi's Commonwealth Games serve as a metaphor for the Commonwealth as a whole. Is it fit for purpose? Is it relevant? Is it prepared for the challenges of the 21st century? It started as an experiment in forging solidarity among diverse nations, but the sad truth is that it now looks rather tired in today's crowded marketplace of international groupings.

The Commonwealth needs a 21st-century makeover. The key to its future success lies not in sports meets or leaders' summits — as worthwhile as they may be — but in making more of the people-to-people networks that bind the association's 54 members and set the Commonwealth apart.

Polling done in seven countries last year suggests that the association's profile is worryingly low and, worse, encumbered by historical baggage. Only a third of people questioned

could identify any Commonwealth activity (and half of those said the Games or sports), and high levels of indifference were evident. A quarter of Jamaicans thought Barack Obama was head of the Commonwealth.

Among policymakers also there is disquiet about the role of the Commonwealth on the world stage. A small and poorly resourced secretariat seems unable to make a notable difference in any key policy area and is unwilling to speak out on the core values supposed to underpin the association. The Commonwealth struggles to make its mark on global issues in the way that it did on the struggle against apartheid in South Africa or white rule in Rhodesia. Today's Commonwealth seems to shirk controversy rather than court it.

Happily, the pressure for reform does seem to be building. An Eminent Persons Group, including Sir Malcolm Rifkind, has recently been created to look at the association's future. And in these cash-strapped times, as several key governments review their expenditure on multilateral agencies, the Commonwealth's publicly funded organs will have to modernise and show better value for money. Yet institutional reform will only go part of the way. The Commonwealth's real potential lies in its informal networks.

Perhaps surprisingly, trade provides an example of this. Contrary to expectations and despite the demise of special preferences that once existed, the proportion of world trade that occurs within the Commonwealth has actually increased over the past two decades. In fact, new research suggests that a Commonwealth country's trade with another member is likely to be a third to a half more than with a non-member, even after taking into account other possible contributory

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factors such as language, proximity and level of development. So Britain's trading relationship with Zambia, or Canada's with Trinidad is stronger than with similar countries that do not belong to the Commonwealth.

This "Commonwealth effect" probably exists because, although the Empire ended years ago, relationships across the association remain strong, and common institutional set-ups, such as similar legal systems, make it easier to do business. The Commonwealth also retains a power

to connect people in ways that other multilateral associations cannot. The OECD or G20 cannot boast more than 100 civil society organisations devoted to promoting their cause.

Indeed, Commonwealth professional and social associations predate the inter-governmental one. In a world of spiralling virtual networks, the Commonwealth is grounded in real networks that can add tangible value and connect people in meaningful ways.

This is where the association's diversity can be a true strength. Last month, 38 young people from 32 very different Commonwealth countries gathered in Rwanda to discuss shared challenges regarding war and peace; common bonds and an agenda that they will retain as they become leading figures in their own countries.

The world has moved on since the Commonwealth's official institutions were created. A few decades ago the Commonwealth offered unique international opportunities, whether for a Prime Minister or an elite sprinter. Today, both are spoilt for choice and the Commonwealth has to come up with a stronger proposition for the way it adds value to the world.

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