

# Examining the Validity of a 'Global Britain' and Its Ties with the Commonwealth

Written by Alec Llywelyn Frost

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ALEC LLYWELYN FROST, JUL 29 2019

The withdrawal of Britain from the European Union (more commonly known by the portmanteau 'Brexit') has been linked with an economic and political shift in interests away from Europe and towards the rest of the world, especially the Commonwealth. Fundamental political figures of the Brexit movement, such as Boris Johnson, have proposed that Britain should follow an ambitious agenda of building multiple trade agreements on top of the strong links that it has with Commonwealth nations (Bishop and Clegg 2018, Murray-Evans 2016). This line of thinking has been adapted into government policy, entitled 'Global Britain', as a crucial part of Britain's foreign policy after leaving the EU, whereby the government will have to negotiate its first trade deals in over 4 decades once leaving the EU customs union (if it does). This essay will begin by explaining the development of the Commonwealth from the British Empire, then assessing if the policy of 'Global Britain' is little more than "a hashtag" (to quote Lord Hannay from House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2018)) and finally looking at the current economic relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth. The conclusion will then address the validity of the 'Global Britain' policy being proposed by the current government.

### History

Although stretching back to the beginning of the British Empire, the Commonwealth's origins date to the Durham report of 1840, which promoted the idea of self-governance in the British colonies (Larby 1993, p. XV). The key relationship at the beginning of the Commonwealth was between Britain and her Dominion (semi-independent) states; Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, being that they were a "homogenous group" (May 2010, p. 124). These four nations are still to this day important states within the Commonwealth. Canada has always been a dedicated supporter of the Commonwealth owing to the similarities with its liberal foreign policy and has financially contributed generously to the Commonwealth (Kitchen 1996, p. 152). The Commonwealth would remain in a semi-imperial format until the end of the Second World War with the rapid dismantling of the British Empire, when the realisation occurred that Britain was no longer a great power that could sustain an empire (Kitchen 1996, p. 101). Soon after in 1965, the grouping (now established of sovereign states) agreed that a Commonwealth Secretariat should be in control of the administrative role of Commonwealth affairs, meaning that "the British Commonwealth had effectively ceased to be British" (Larby 1993, p. xvi). This overhaul also meant that the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences, which were exclusively for the British Prime Minister and the Dominion members, turned into the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which began in 1971. CHOGMs take place every two years and act as a "diverse and often divisive forum, a kind of mini-United Nations for one-quarter of the world" (Kitchen 1996, p. 145). The establishment of a Secretariat and the CHOGM drastically changed the Commonwealth, from being "little more than a reversionary of the British Empire" to "an interlocutor, promoter, initiator, or ginger-group for north-south relationships" (May 2010, p. 132).

The most important inherent feature of the Commonwealth is that there are no shared properties between states apart from their historic links to the British Empire. The current membership includes the hugely populous nations of India, Pakistan, and Nigeria alongside many small states like Gambia and Singapore (May 2010, p. 124). In addition, there is huge political diversity, from the Islamic kingdom of Brunei to the constitutional monarchy of Britain. This lack of shared characteristics means that it is unlike any other regional or international organisation, as it is "not a close

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alliance with a set of specific tasks" (Kitchen 1996, p. 160), so critique of the Commonwealth being a pointless ceremony seems to not recognise that it could not work as an excessive, supranational entity like the EU. Nor is there significant appetite for it to be one, which can be seen in Theresa May's opening statement at the 25<sup>th</sup> CHOGM where she described the Commonwealth as "an opportunity to show just what can be achieved through co-ordinated action and co-operation" (2018).

"The Commonwealth exists because of the British Empire" (Kitchen p. 161) and this places Britain in an awkward position, where its imperial legacy still lingers in an organisation that promotes equality amongst big and small nations. The awkwardness or ignorance can especially be seen in examples such as when Whitehall officials were reportedly coining the term "Empire 2.0" in the newly created Department for International Trade (Boffey 2018). The history of the Commonwealth shows a transformation that was not reliant on British instruction, showing the independence of the states within the grouping.

## Global Britain

It is quite telling that the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee could not find a minister who could give a definitive explanation of what 'Global Britain' really means (HC 780, p. 7). The term was mentioned eleven times by Theresa May in her Lancaster House speech in 2017, where she stated that Britain is "profoundly internationalist" with a populous who want to trade "beyond the borders of our continent" and that "the great prize for this country – the opportunity ahead – is to use this moment to build a truly Global Britain." (May 2017). The sentiment within these quotes is that Britain has an unlimited potential for the future because it is no longer 'locked' into European trade. 'The opportunity ahead' is to make free trade deals with the rest of the world, principally our 'old friends' (the Commonwealth) and 'new allies' (China, Brazil and others). And this sentiment is shared by Brexiter supporters such as Daniel Hannan, a Conservative MEP, who stated that Mrs May was on the right path with her plans for a 'Global Britain' (Switzer 2017).

Critics have pointed out significant flaws with the 'Global Britain' policy. The Economist's Bagehot columnist (2018) argued that there are three fundamental flaws, the first being that there is significant exaggeration of the global reach of current British institutions. Their second point is that Britain could have pursued a 'global' agenda whilst within the EU's Customs Union. Finally, Bagehot states that trading predominately with Anglosphere countries that also speak English is fraught because "the effect of distance trumps the effect of culture by a significant distance." Bagehot's critique clearly sets out that 'Global Britain' could have been pursued before Brexit, and that Britain's place in the world is smaller than perceived.

A trend amongst the critique, including Bagehot, is that 'Global Britain' is speciously filled with nostalgia of a powerful, imperial Britain. The language used by the Conservative party has sometimes been offensive, such as Boris Johnson's assessment of Africa being a problem, the source of diseases and insecurity, and heavily reliant on Britain to fix its problems (Polońska-Kimunguyi and Kimunguyi 2017). The memories of Britain being a leader of the Commonwealth nations are central to the Brexiteer rhetoric (Arens 2018, p. 572) and this powerful narrative continues onto the Commonwealth, which is presented as a huge opportunity. Although it has a significant population of 2.4 billion people (Ward 2019), the 'Global Britain' rhetoric fails to appreciate that the grouping has "hardly any geopolitical relevance" (McBride 2018). The strength of the Commonwealth can also be seen in the spending into the institution, with Great Britain supplying £15.4 million, a third of the total costs (Cheeseman & Tomlin 2018, p. 355) which pales in significance to the EU's spending of over \$100 billion yearly on only economic development and aid (McBride 2018).

The Foreign Affairs Committee asked three expert witnesses to give their view on what 'Global Britain' means, after the unsatisfactory Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) memorandum which described it as "little more than a continuation of the FCO's current activities, with modest adjustments in some areas" (2018, p. 11). The experts thought positively about the idea of 'Global Britain' but were uncertain about what it was as a policy. Sir Simon Fraser, former Permanent Under Secretary at the FCO, stated that 'Global Britain' is "a bit of a slogan, or a headline" (2018, p. 11). Overall, the experts were also worried about other states' perception of what 'Global Britain' means owing to the lack of clarity, with Baroness Ashton arguing the success of 'Global Britain' will be measured by if other

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countries could be able to explain what it means (2018, p. 13).

A key problem emerging from comparing the history of the Commonwealth to the rhetoric surrounding 'Global Britain' is that Britain has not accepted that the Commonwealth is no longer 'the British Commonwealth' and subsequently that Britain no longer has the huge influence it once did as a global empire.

## Trade

The 'Global Britain' policy asserts that there are unlimited possibilities for trade with the Commonwealth, and yet it seems peculiar that current trade patterns are small. Britain's trade is "concentrated in a few countries" (Henning 2018, p. 24) with India, Canada, Australia, Singapore, and South Africa accounting for 71 percent of the total Britain-Commonwealth trade in 2017 (Ward 2019). Henning 2018 states that treating the Commonwealth as a homogenous block with endless opportunities "must be approached with caution" (p. 25) and Cheeseman & Tomlin argues that trying to replace EU trade with the Commonwealth "does not fit with reality" (2018, p. 355).

Comparing British-Commonwealth trade to the EU does not help the 'endless opportunity' narrative either. The think tank Bruegel found that India, which is perceived by the Brexit supporters as being the jackpot for economic success, has tripled the amount of trade with the EU since 2000, but trade between India and Britain has stayed stagnant through the same period (Bruegel 2017). In addition, a government briefing paper compared British-Commonwealth trade against British-EU and found that the exports to the Commonwealth accounted for roughly the same amount to Germany, and imports from the Commonwealth were roughly the same as the Netherlands (2019). It therefore seems an unrealistic argument to replace the 44 percent of total British exports that go to neighbouring countries in the EU, with the 9.5 percent that goes to distant lands in the Commonwealth (Walker 2018) and to an economic grouping which may represent 2.4 billion people but is only 55 percent as big as the EU after Britain leaves (Bagehot 2018).

To conclude, the analysis of the history of British-Commonwealth relations reveals that Britain is in an awkward position, where it simultaneously refers to its empire days of being a dominant world power, whilst also having to accept that the modern Commonwealth embraces equality amongst nations and tries to defend the rights of small countries. Despite this, the Commonwealth's loose 'global-networking' structure, including CHOGM meetings, matches the aspirations of the Brexit vote which wanted to move away from the supranational EU organisation. For the British-Commonwealth relationship to improve, the imperialistic rhetoric of figures such as Boris Johnson needs to change and be replaced by the aspirational narrative of 'Global Britain.' There are two principle issues with the current government policy of 'Global Britain.' First, it is currently "mushy thinking," to quote Baroness Ashton from the Foreign Affairs Committee (2018). The policy has no unique or redeeming features apart from continuing the current path. For 'Global Britain' to work, the government must state what the policy means, for instance if free trade deals will be negotiated with the important states in the Commonwealth, or if tourism and migration will also be encouraged with reduced visa requirements. Second, it is assumed that trade with the Commonwealth can match and exceed the current trade with the EU. This is a dangerous assumption that is based solely on speculation and population size. For Britain to avoid a global decline after Brexit, it must concurrently be pursuing "old friends and new allies" while not forgetting its critical trade relations within Europe. This is reliant on every country knowing what 'Global Britain' means as opposed to the current "slogan" being trotted out without any practical meaning.

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*Written by: Alec Llywelyn Frost*  
*Written at: University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol*  
*Written for: Alan Greer*  
*Date written: March 2019*