



Written evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence

Submitted by the Royal Commonwealth Society

Executive summary

- The Commonwealth is an important venue in which member states can construct shared understandings on certain values and principles.
- As a network of countries that share significant traits, the Commonwealth helps uphold those values that member states agree to be important and relevant in the modern world.
- Given that soft power can be said to exist in a situation where other states 'want what you want', the Commonwealth provides a venue in which soft power can be both created and utilised.
- The Commonwealth is not simply a venue through which the United Kingdom can further its own interests. Each state's voice has the same weight.
- It can be said, however, that the values that Commonwealth states have freely chosen to uphold are very much in line with UK foreign policy goals.
- This means that the Commonwealth is a ready-made network in which 53 nations have, of their own accord, bought into the main tenets of Britain's overarching worldview.
- The modern Commonwealth therefore represents an unparalleled opportunity for Britain to further its soft power objectives.
- Britain must maintain and strengthen its engagement with the Commonwealth, both at an institutional level and at a grassroots level.
- The negative or non-existent public perception of the Commonwealth that our research has uncovered must be addressed by Britain actively and publically making the case for the modern Commonwealth.
- Accusations of irrelevance and anachronism need to be confronted head on, and a positive case for a renewed institution needs to be made.
- At the grassroots level, Britain must ensure that those civil society organisations that work to promote Commonwealth values remain strong and influential. It is at this level that change can be achieved on issues that require societal rather than just governmental change.
- Britain must also ensure that engagement between businesses in Commonwealth countries grows and strengthens. This is especially relevant considering that the Commonwealth contains some of the fastest growing economies in the world.



The Royal Commonwealth Society

1. The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) is a civil society organisation founded in 1868. The RCS seeks to identify contemporary issues and propose practical solutions that contribute to the wellbeing and prosperity of Commonwealth nations. Headquartered in London, the RCS has an international network in some 40 Commonwealth countries. It is the oldest and largest civil society organisation devoted to the modern Commonwealth. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the work of this committee.

Soft power as shared understanding

2. Our conception of 'soft power' goes along with that outlined by Professor Joseph Nye. This quote covers the definition quite comprehensively:

“The basic concept of power is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want. There are three major ways to do that: one is to threaten them with sticks; the second is to pay them with carrots; the third is to attract them or co-opt them, so that they want what you want. If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in carrots and sticks”¹.

3. Creating a situation where states 'want' the same thing through building shared understanding is absolutely central to the modern Commonwealth, and to the RCS's vision of how the Commonwealth can continue to develop over the coming years.

Commonwealth values

4. The Commonwealth represents a commitment amongst 54 states to a shared set of values. These states have agreed that in certain areas, they indeed *want* the same outcomes as one another. The Commonwealth Charter, which was signed by all 54 states and by The Queen in her role as Head of the Commonwealth in March of this year is the most recent and clearest formulation yet of these core values.
5. If we are to look closely at the values contained within this document, it is clear that they are mainly those same values that the UK considers a core part of its identity on the international stage. For instance, the UK has worked to establish itself as an advocate for principles such as Democracy, Human Rights, Freedom of Expression, Rule of Law, Sustainable Development, protecting the Environment, and Gender Equality. All of these

¹ Nye, J (1990) Soft Power, Foreign Policy, vol. 80, pp 153-171.



principles are contained within the charter (Articles I, II, V, VII, IX, X and XII respectively)².

6. A cursory reading of this might lead one to believe that the UK simply uses the Commonwealth as a neo-imperial conduit for furthering its own values amongst its former colonies. The reality, however, is far more complex. The Commonwealth is an institution that operates on a consensus basis. The Charter, for instance, was unanimously adopted by all Commonwealth states. The fact that the UK's core values are contained within the Commonwealth Charter is not so much a reflection of the UK's influence over the Commonwealth, but more a reflection of the complex interdependence that has historically existed between these 54 states. The UK's values have indeed shaped the understandings at the core of the institution, but they have equally *been shaped* by them.
7. Rather than viewing the Commonwealth as an avenue through which British soft power can be accrued and utilised, it should be viewed as a venue in which large states and small states, developed states and developing states all with some shared historical experiences can present their value systems, and can also learn from the value systems of other members.
8. With this in mind, the agreement around the Commonwealth charter has handed Britain a considerable soft power opportunity. 53 other Commonwealth states have freely chosen to adopt a shared value system that closely resembles the UK's overarching worldview. There is now immense potential within the Commonwealth for the UK to strengthen the shared understandings with these countries that underpin its soft power. It can then use this to achieve meaningful change at both national and societal levels.

The public perception of the Commonwealth

9. The Commonwealth suffers from several problems with regard to its image. The most dangerous of these is that many see it as an irrelevant and anachronistic institution. Considering its potential for furthering values that the UK supports, the British government must counter this by making a case for the continuing importance and relevance of the modern Commonwealth.
10. Research carried out by the RCS in 2010 found that amongst British citizens, the Commonwealth was seen to have the least value to the UK when compared to the UN, G8, NATO and EU. On top of this, nearly half of respondents could not name *any* activities undertaken by the Commonwealth³.

² Commonwealth Secretariat (2013), Charter of the Commonwealth, retrieved 1 September 2013, <<http://www.thecommonwealth.org/files/252053/FileName/CharteroftheCommonwealth.pdf>>

³ Bennett J., Sriskandarajah D. and Ware Z. (2010) An Uncommon Association, A Wealth of Potential: Final Report of the Commonwealth Conversation, London, UK: Royal Commonwealth Society.



11. This disengagement with the Commonwealth directly affects the UK's interests. The more that the Commonwealth is viewed as a historical relic, the less effectively its intergovernmental and civil society functions will operate. The institution already suffers from a 'historical baggage' problem as a result of its imperial past. A strong case therefore needs to be consistently made for its relevance as a contemporary institution. If the UK government fails to clearly make this case, the institution will continue to lose importance, and will have less of an impact on the governments and societies of member states.

Commonwealth civil society

12. One of the unique features of the Commonwealth is that it does not only operate at an intergovernmental level. High level interactions take place on top of a deep network of ties between businesses, academic bodies, professional institutions and civil society organisations.
13. It is naturally hard to quantify the benefit that the non-governmental Commonwealth brings the UK. However, one only has to look at the work of bodies such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, or the Commonwealth Lawyers Association to see that this network is contributing to the longevity of institutions such as the rule of law and parliamentary democracy worldwide. Non-governmental Commonwealth bodies are maintaining and strengthening the UK's soft power.
14. In addition to their modern activities, it must also be kept in mind that many of these Commonwealth bodies have an inheritance that no other international institution could claim to have. The Royal Commonwealth Society itself was founded in 1868, and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in 1911. Institutions such as the EU or G8 are still very young in comparison, and they cannot compete with the historical capital existent in the Commonwealth. This should be seen as a unique source of strength, legitimacy and continuity.
15. Ensuring that these bodies remain strong and active is just as important as engaging with Commonwealth countries at the governmental level. This is especially relevant on issues where deep societal change, rather than just a change in government policy is needed. The UK needs to increase its dialogue and involvement with such organisations.

Commonwealth business

16. Whilst it has been noted that much of the value that the UK derives from the Commonwealth is hard to quantify, it is also true that the UK certainly derives a material, financial value from its membership of the institution.



17. Research undertaken by the RCS found that if one compares the trade volumes that are passing through two country pairs, the trading volume between two Commonwealth members is likely to be a third to a half more than trade between a Commonwealth member and a non-Commonwealth member. The familiarity between countries, similar legal systems, shared business networks, the use of the English language and other factors produce what the RCS terms the 'Commonwealth advantage'⁴.
18. Indeed, the English language in itself is a major asset. When referring to sources of soft power, Professor Nye stated that English 'has become the *lingua franca* of the global economy'⁵. The language of the Commonwealth is also the language of business, and this provides a tremendous advantage for member states.
19. What we see here is the 'soft' aspects of the Commonwealth delivering a 'hard', measurable benefit to its member states. It is our intention to further explore this quantifiable impact in our research series '*Commonwealth Compared*'.
20. Britain is using its Commonwealth advantage to some extent. Some of the biggest leaps in UK exports – of both goods and services in the last two years (2010-2012) have been to Commonwealth countries. 33.5% to India, 31.2% to South Africa, 30% to Australia, and 18.3% to Canada⁶.
21. Despite this, there is more that can be done. The only body that works to promote trade is the Commonwealth Business Council (CBC). There is currently no formal mechanism through which the Commonwealth promotes trade or investment. This is clearly one area in which the UK can have an impact. It is also worth noting that promoting the informal Commonwealth institutions mentioned above will have a real effect on the material benefit that the UK derives from the network. These institutions preserve the Commonwealth effect, and making sure that they prosper is exactly how the UK should be working to maintain its soft power.

Conclusion

22. In 2011, the UK government made a commitment to putting the Commonwealth 'at the very heart of British foreign policy'⁷. Whilst we have seen some progress, it does not seem that the UK has really grasped the fact that it is a member of a network of 54 countries that overwhelmingly buy into its worldview. There is a wealth of potential here that the UK can use to

⁴ Bennett J., Chappell P., Reed H. and Sriskandarajah D. (2010) *Trading places: the 'Commonwealth effect' revisited*, London, UK: Royal Commonwealth Society.

⁵ Nye, J (1990) *Soft Power*, *Foreign Policy*, vol. 80, pp 153-171.

⁶ Howell, D. (2013) *Britain, the EU, and the Commonwealth*, *The Independent*, London, 17 July

⁷ Hague W. (2011) *The Commonwealth is "back at the heart of British Foreign Policy"*, speech delivered to 2011 Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference, London, 27 July



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further its objectives, but in order to do so, it must meaningfully engage with all sides of the modern Commonwealth.

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