

The Relevance of the Commonwealth of Nations In Today's World

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of the Commonwealth of Nations as one of the oldest voluntary international organizations of the world. It further assesses the relevance of the organization in the light of recent developments which have affected both the primus inter pare – Great Britain and the other constituting members of the organization. The paper submits that, even though there exist some problems within the fold, the role played by members such as Britain, Canada and Nigeria in Africa justifies/balances the obvious reasons for its establishment.

Evolution and Development of the Commonwealth

In order to properly comprehend what is meant by the term 'commonwealth' that is the association of nations which retain a close connection with the United Kingdom and whose heads of governments meet together frequently to discuss matters of common interest – we must go back to the beginning of the twentieth century when the United Kingdom was still an imperial power. However, unlike other international organizations with exact dates of establishment, the commonwealth has no precise date for its inauguration or inception. As such, the term evolution has often been used to portray its metamorphosis till its foundation gained organizational prominence. Yet, it is pertinent to note that its historical foundation predates most other international organizations, including the United Nations which came into being only in 1945.

Akinjide Osuntokun has noted that the evolution of the commonwealth could be put at 1867, when Canada attained dominion status from Great Britainⁱ. However, Cyril Obi in his article – "Nigeria-Africa and the Commonwealth" states thus, "in terms of evolution, the Commonwealth began with the introduction of self government in Canada in the 1840s, with Australia, New Zealand and South Africa following suit just before the First World Warⁱⁱ. He clearly posits, however that the modern commonwealth began with the entry of India and Pakistan in 1947 and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in 1948. In 1949, when India decided to become a republic, the Commonwealth heads of Government agreed to replace allegiance to the British Crown with recognition of the British monarch as Head of the Commonwealth as a condition for membershipⁱⁱⁱ.

Another scholar, Prof. Ayo Akinbobola clarifies his position on the foundation of the commonwealth. He states thus, "Late in the 19th Century, the idea of the need to devise an arrangement for continued cooperation of the British empire developed in Britain as overseas dependencies were being liberated from British imperial rule and attaining a measure of nationhood. In 1887, the issue was deliberated upon at an imperial conference attended by Prime Ministers and other representation of the British Colonial Governments. Similar meetings took place in 1897, 1902 and in 1907, at the last meeting, a commonwealth organization became a reality^{iv}. Akinbobola succinctly states that "the organization (commonwealth) became formally founded in 1931 as a body of independent states formerly ruled by the British through colonialism^v. Thus, in a historical context, it may be stated that as early as 1897, the roots of the foundation of the commonwealth has been bid.

While the constitution of the organization is not in doubt, it must be noted that the idea to set up the organization crystalized at the beginning of the 20th Century. Although, the royal proclamation of Queen Victoria on September 17, 1900, may be regarded as the first official pronouncement of the organization, it was not until 1901 that some of the British colonies which had then become the dominions put the idea across to British government of meeting, at least, once a year to discuss issues of vital and common interest. These dominions which are Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Ireland felt at that time, that it was illogical for Britain to take decisions without any prior consent of the dominions. This consideration of the earliest members of the commonwealth informed the purpose for which the organization was set up with an undertone of equality and cooperation.

Fortunately, Britain accepted the views of the dominions and since that time, British Prime Ministers and the leaders of the dominions started to meet every year. From 1907, it became customary to have regular

meetings known as imperial conferences. In 1920, efforts were made to define the relations between Britain and the dominions. At the imperial conference held in that year, Britain seized to exercise any authorities over the dominions, even though, she was still represented in the dominions by representatives called Governor-Generals.

Two major events or conferences shaped the very nature and format of operations which the Commonwealth would assume in its evolution process. These were the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and the 1931 Statute of Westminster.

The Balfour Declaration

On November 15, 1926, another important conference was held in London where further deliberations on the relations between Britain (the Mother country) and the five dominions were made. This meeting was known as the Balfour declaration as it was held under the auspices of Lord Balfour, then British Minister for Foreign Colonies and Relations. At the Conference, it was made clear that “all member states of the organization were autonomous within the British empire. It further stated that they were equal in status and that they were in no way subordinate one to another in any respect of their domestic and foreign affairs, even though they were united by a common allegiance, yet they were freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations”.^{vi}

Thus, by this declaration, it was made clear that, first, all members were independent within the organization, that they were equal and that they freely joined the organizations, and that without any prior permission, declared or undeclared any member could quit its membership. With this development, the independence of dominions were established, but still retained were the power of the British Queen to interference in certain matters of these countries. It should be noted that after the Balfour declaration of 1926, the only factors which stood between the dominions and full independence were the power of the United Kingdom Parliament to make laws for them, and their own inability to amend or repeal United Kingdom laws applying to them. To remove these obstacles, parliament enacted a statute which removed virtually all restrictions on dominions power to legislate. Another major development which helped to shape the commonwealth was the statute of Westminster.

The Statute of Westminster

In 1931, at the Conference held at Westminster, London, a statute was promulgated declaring that, henceforth, the dominions were not bound or affected by any act passed by the British Parliament. The statute of Westminster granted the dominions independence in all internal affairs but the British Queen was still required as the head of the dominions. It was also laid down that no future parliament would have effect on a dominion, unless that dominion so consented. In 1949, the 1926 Balfour declaration was put to practical test when one of the member states, Ireland withdrew from the organization, South Africa also withdrew its membership in 1961 from the commonwealth because of her racist apartheid policies. Pakistan withdrew in 1972. All these actions rather than allow the commonwealth crumble helped strengthened the growing ties between the permanent members without any issue.

But meanwhile, in 1945, following the end of the Second World War of 1939-1945, some members who were not of British Colonial origin joined the organization. This new development in its history forced the organization to change its name from the British Commonwealth. In the 1950s and 1960s, more and more noticeable developments began to take place within the rank and file of the organization, especially as most of the Asian and African Countries strove to attain their independence. Significantly, the question of allegiance/commitment to the cause of nationhood of these nations had to be balanced interests of their membership of the commonwealth.

This new development in the history of the organization forced the organization to change its name to the Commonwealth Nations, since these new arrivals were not former British colonies either by origin nor related to Britain by colour or creed. Some of these new states which were not directly British colonies were

accepted technically on the grounds that they were dependencies of Australia and New Zealand and share their membership on such conditions. Others were Cameroun and Mozambique. Cameroon earned its status of membership because it was at a point a trust territory of the United Nations wherein its Southern territories were under Nigeria's government, before both the Northern and Southern territories were merged during their independence. Commonwealth of Nations, the name by which, it is known and called till date has since remained its authentic. It is also noteworthy that since the statue of Westminster, the organization never looked back and as such 1931 has been regarded by some scholars as the year of its foundation.

The Structure

In terms of structure, the commonwealth has a secretary as the head of administration in its Secretariat which currently is located in Marlborough House, London. Other structures and division within its system include the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM), meetings of the Finance Ministers, Political Affairs Division, Economic Affairs Division, Human Resources Division, Gender and Youth Affairs Division, the Science and Technology Division and the Cultural and Sports Development Division.^{vii}

The meetings of the Heads of Government are usually private and informal and operate not by voting but by consensus. The emphasis is on consultation and exchange of views for cooperation. Meetings are held every two years in different capitals of member countries, the last three being in Durban, South Africa (1999) after it came back to the fold and another in Australia in 2001, while Nigeria hosted the Commonwealth in 2005.^{viii}

The Relevance of the Organization in Today's World

Today, the Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary association of fifty-four (54) independent states comprising about one quarter of the world's population. There is no gain-saying the fact that member states have derived and still continue to derive immense benefits from the commonwealth both during its heydays and thereafter in the present circumstances of multi-polar power distribution. In today's world power balance as United States domineering status can no longer dictate every current development contributions/efforts of other individual organisations and their members come into foreplay. There are limitations from other forces, terrorism, elements of former cold war exacerbation states. The cooperation level within the group affects, trade, finance, defence, educations, scientific research, law, medicine, agriculture and sports as reflected in the departments of the commonwealth's structure.

Thus, as Gabriel Olusanya has noted "the ties that binds the commonwealth are highly diverse. Blood ties engendered through marital relationships by citizens members-nations of the organization provide sentimental attachments to Britain and thus goes back to many decades during the formative years, when strong links with each other further justified the essence of the cooperation level".^{ix} Further, common judicial and educational systems as well as the use of English Language as official language provide strong ties for others. These ties have been further cemented and strengthened by trade and investment, currency arrangements, population, migrations and sports.

It must be noted that the far-reaching results of the commonwealth which led to the establishment of a Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965 reinforced the need for a lean bureaucracy which was developed to assist the Secretary-General in responding to questions of peace, democracy and development.

Thus, as a result of a more organised formal operations, the need for cooperation has increased between the more economically advanced countries of the organization towards the developing member countries in Asia, in Pacific, Africa and the Caribbean. The adoption accretion of francophone Cameroon's and locophone Mozambique as members has broadened membership beyond historical and colonial links with Great Britain. In the economic sphere, while Britain, Canada or Australia continue to extend economic assistance in the area of trade export and importation of goods from member countries, these advanced economies have also contributed

immensely to technical and industrial growth of the countries that have agreed to partner with them. More importantly, citizens of Commonwealth countries receive patronage in business transactions and investment from such strong partners.

Another relevance of the commonwealth in today's world is the influencing solidarity which the organization gives to any member state that is undergoing political crisis. This was exemplified by its intervention in the Nigeria Civil war of 1967/70, during the political crisis caused by the annulment of the 1993 General election in Nigeria, when M.K.O. Abiola clearly won an election that was annulled.

Another relevance of the commonwealth in today's world is the support given to one another in the educational field, scientific and technological support and research assistants. In the heydays, British teachers were seconded to Nigerian schools with a view to solving the problem of shortage of teachers in the country. Perhaps, it is pertinent to appraise Nigeria's role in the commonwealth in the area of decolonisation for the rest of such African countries as Zimbabwe (1980), South Africa in 1994 after it re-joined the commonwealth after Nelson Mandela's inauguration as South African first black President. Nigeria also supported some indigent commonwealth countries financially during the regime of General Yakubu Gowon. It also increased the number of scholarship available to commonwealth students in her university.

Till date, the commonwealth plays the role of regulating the affairs of its former colonies albeit indirectly as no nation would want the direct intervention of its country. Thus, on the eve of the 1995 CHOGM meeting in New Zealand when the Abacha government executed the nine Ogoni activities including the playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa, Nigeria was immediately suspended from the commonwealth. Afterwards, a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group made up of select group of foreign ministers was established to monitor Nigeria's compliance to the Harare Declarations. Further, sanctions were imposed in 1996 on Nigeria including arms embargo, freezing of accounts of government leaders, ban on sports and an unsuccessful attempt to boycott Nigeria oil.

Perhaps, it should be mentioned that historically, the first CHOGM that Nigeria attended in 1961 in London saw Balewa playing a major role in the suspension of South-Africa from the commonwealth, especially came after the Sharpeville massacre of that year during which scores of demonstrating Africans were shot in the back and killed by remorseless South African police.

When Ian Smith embarked on unilateral declaration of independence in 1965, Nigeria was one of the first countries to call on the British to bring back legality to the erring colony. Nigeria was so involved in the whole issue that a special commonwealth conference was held in Lagos in January 1966. Hardly had the Conference ended when the government of Sir Abubakar Balewa was overthrown in a bloody coup d'état which led to the death of a lot of other Nigerian politicians.

Although most third world countries tend to see the commonwealth as a British inspired association of sovereign states, they continue to play a prominent role in the political economy of most member states till date. It must be acknowledged that British still play the mother-role through its payment of a preponderant portion of the budget of the commonwealth secretariat. Yet it does everything to ensure that its taint of neo-colonial control or imposition on any member of the organization is not felt by any member. To further the neo-colonial tendencies and suspicions which member countries, especially of the African Caribbean, Pacific (ACP) states may raise in the present circumstances, former Prime Minister, Tony Blair even suggested sometimes that the secretariat be moved to South Africa, though, this suggestion hardly held any water.

In pursuit of more relevance in the 21st Century, the commonwealth has moved away from a preoccupation with political issues to economic matters, especially in relation to the betterment of the lots of the South in the North-South dialogue on how to improve the economic life of its people. The organization is still very relevant in questions of peace and conflict resolution among its various component members. The commonwealth has been involved in the resolution of Peace and Talks in the Solomon Islands, Papua, New Guinea, Lesotho, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

The commonwealth in today's world has also been involved in election monitoring in many countries notably in Kenya, Pakistan and Nigeria through the deployment of observers and critics of the elections meant to

uphold democratic principles. One vital focus of the commonwealth is that of improvement and economic development of member states, which is given vent through various activities of the organization. For example, there is a Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), which helps in poverty alleviation in all developing countries. The secretariat also helps in providing technical support for debit reconciliation and negotiation for countries that have personal deficits in these areas.

The relevance of the commonwealth goes beyond its transactions within member-countries to other international organisations where collaboration and cooperation from such organizations as the World Trade Organization are accessed to ensure that its members benefit from its due allocations and draw from the relevant quota assigned the Third World countries who often times neglect the use of such opportunities. Thus, another role of the commonwealth as a matter of guidance is to advise its members on how to tap their resources for development in other bodies/international organisations. For example, Nigeria and Ghana receives generous technical support from Canada and United Kingdom and from the various organs of the United Nations organisation till date.

Another area of attention for commonwealth relevance in today's world is the all-important network of the commonwealth development cooperation which has substantial investments in its member states. The investments come in various dimensions-industrial production, product sourcing and sponsorship, raw materials research and development, export financing and so on.

The relevance of the commonwealth in today's world can further be viewed through the prism of its supportive desire for debts write-off for the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), many of which are commonwealth countries. The Durbar CHOGM of 1999 adopted the Fan Court Declaration on Globalisation and people centred development, in which debt reduction was called for these states.

Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi has further shown the importance of the commonwealth in today's world which lies in its intrinsic value rather than in monetary qualification.^x Therefore, in today's world, it pays to belong to a body united by a common language, a common legal and political system and a common educational system such as the commonwealth with a population of two billion which is a third of the human race.^{xi}

In the emerging uni-polar or even multi-polar system, some are wont to assert that since the end of the super power rivalry, a paramount object of today's commonwealth is the advancement of democracy, human rights and promotion of sustainable economic growth and social development.

In the pervading circumstances, even though the commonwealth does not have the formality and structures of the United Nations but it works and it is the moral principles upon which it stands than the force that it can muster that makes its relevance almost external. The relevance of the commonwealth can be further gauged by the fact that its example is being followed by other blocs such as the La Franco Phone, the Spanish-speaking countries and the Lucophone world.

Further, it could also be inferred that the interventions of the commonwealth on certain global issues prepares members for global consensus before it reaches the United Nations level, since its head of state meets to discuss all current issues of the world.

Another vital relevance of the commonwealth in today's world is that there is a growing commonwealth community scattered in many commonwealth countries. For example, there is an estimated one Million Nigerians in England and certainly not less than 10 thousand in Canada. There are Nigerians in almost every commonwealth country including Fiji in the Pacific Ocean. There are of course commonwealth citizens in Nigeria, but there are perhaps few commonwealth countries whose nationals travel as much as Nigerians. The implication of this is that every where commonwealth citizens reside, they are likely to play significant roles in those countries of commonwealth with the African "can do" spirit. A lot of Africans in diaspora have also invested billions of pounds in the property market in Britain, just because of the commonwealth ties which goes back to this calibre of Africans, Asians and Caribbean's immigrants who settled in various commonwealth countries such as Britain, Canada, New Zealand, more investment will continue to transpire in these countries. For example, Nigeria is the second biggest investor in Nigeria and equally in some other African countries.

Thus, it may be stated that the real essence and importance of the commonwealth for its members is that it provides an operational venue for the realization of their national interests. This point is justifiable, when one considers the role played by the commonwealth in the darkest hour of Nigeria's political oppression under the jackboots of General Sani Abacha (1995-1998).

It may be recalled that Canada and Britain stood by Nigerian people and provided a warning to the United States which seemed prepared at a point, to accept Abacha, provided he transformed to a civilian regime. British influence and Canadian report with the USA prevented this unhappy embrace by real politics by America under the presence of the oil lobby. Nigeria also played similar roles in peace keeping efforts in Sierra Leone, a commonwealth country during its crisis period.

Nigeria was equally reassured the cooperation of the commonwealth in August 1999 in assisting it to rollover stolen wealth deposited in foreign banks by various Nigerians, especially that of Abacha and his cohorts. Also, the commonwealth continue to curtail human rights abuses and supporting democratisation in African-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) countries during their electioneering periods up till date.

In promoting a just world economic order, the commonwealth secretariat showed great concern over debt problems in the 1980s and have not backed entirely till date. The commonwealth devised the Lawson plan in 1987, which called on the Paris Club to reschedule debt on more concessional terms. This was also included in the Toronto Terms which advocated for a cancellation of one-third debt or equivalent measure in terms of concessional rescheduling.^{xii}

Problems

Just as many other multi-lateral groupings around the world, the commonwealth experiences problems of consensus on certain issues, especially, during its heydays when the new members of the African, Asia and Pacific Countries were newly joining the organisation. Although, Great Britain did not portray any domination tendencies, yet it was not easy for certain countries to concur with some positions of Great Britain on certain issues. For example, during the days before South Africa and Namibia attained majority rule, many African countries ordered on the British position who were lenient on the British position who were lenient to their kith and kin in South Africa.

On the other hand, Britain faced greater problems in reconciling with its foreign policy position with increasing economic problems in the country, especially when it joined the European Economic Community which later transformed to the European Union. The attention and its focus changed and tilted more towards the European partners than with its members in the Commonwealth of Nations.

Also, the New African Countries also had to look for other trading partners in the Soviet Union (Russia), France, Germany and other countries who were not particularly members of the commonwealth in order to reap the much needed benefits of their products, produce and financial and technical assistance. Most of those countries after independence faced other growth and political problems as military interventions pervaded in most of these countries, some of which did not respect Commonwealth allegiance and always patronized whoever favoured them most.

However, all these cannot take away from the existent bonds with these countries as the military days trailed past away and most African Countries are now returning to the paths of democratic rule and the problems of bi-polarism is almost a forgotten issue.

Current Challenges

The current challenges of the commonwealth concern how to relate to new developments that have global implications such as NEPAD, HIV/AIDS, Curbing malaria, terrorism and human trafficking which seem endemic in most of the third world countries who are equally members of the commonwealth. This should further be reconciled with the United Nations. Millennium Development goals and targets which cuts across unemployment, universal primary education, promote gender equability, improve material, health, reduce child

mortality, can but HIV, malaria etc. environment sustainability and develop a global economy for development.^{xiii} The commonwealth has to devise ways and strategies of addressing these issues, especially, when they seriously affect member countries of the commonwealth.

Whatever be the case, the commonwealth must prove its relevance in the twenty-first Century to its African members by the way it engages with the NEPAD initiative, the relation with the newly formed African Union (AU) and other health challenges as the HIV/AIDS reduction problems.

The commonwealth must also ensure that it improves on its immigration laws and assistance to the poorer countries of Africa who seek to develop their economic development. Finally, the cord of the bond must not be cut, as more seeds of endurance should be sown between the more advanced economics of the commonwealth and the less-endowed ones through cultural relations in the fields of education, technical support and more important by interactions through games such as the just concluded commonwealth games.

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