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# GLOBAL POLICY INSIGHTS

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## POST-BREXIT WORLD: UK AND THE COMMONWEALTH

### SEMINAR REPORT

18 DECEMBER 2018 | HOUSE OF COMMONS,  
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM



### THE BIG QUESTION

As the United Kingdom braces itself for a potentially turbulent exit from the European Union, the future of its global partnerships has seemed unclear at best, and at worst, troubling. Recent decades have seen the Commonwealth take a backseat in Britain's global strategy, where the UK has adopted a symbolic rather than synergistic approach to the association. However, as Britain plunges deeper into uncertainty, many have predicted the Commonwealth to be an integral part of post-Brexit British policy. Indeed, both the Royal Family and Foreign Office have busied themselves forging tighter relationships with Commonwealth countries since Brexit became a reality in 2016. However, Britain's renewed interest in the Commonwealth has not been without controversy, with critics labelling the phenomenon 'the Empire 2.0'.

The question arises as to how the UK can successfully revive its role in a network that many see as outdated, tainted by its roots in colonial rule. Moreover, can a robust Commonwealth network ever provide the social and economic prosperity that was promised by the EU?

It is in this context that Global Policy Insights hosted the event: 'Post Brexit World: UK and the Commonwealth' on 18th December 2018 at the House of Commons, Westminster, London.



*The seminar brought together diplomats, politicians and industry figures to consider the merits of a post-Brexit strategy that engages the Commonwealth, and to discuss the opportunities available to the UK across a variety of sectors in Commonwealth countries.*

## About GPI

Global Policy Insights is an international, centrist policy institute researching models of governance, political economy and policies aimed at accelerating socio-economic growth at the local, national and international levels by building a strong network of engagement between governments, corporates, academic and professional communities across the world.

In line with its vision and the current developments in the ongoing contentious issue that is Brexit, GPI convened this Seminar to discuss the repositioning of Britain's global status in a post-Brexit world. In a context of uncertainty, reshaping of the world order and power balances, the historical association of nations — the Commonwealth becomes an emerging forum of special interest and discussion for the United Kingdom.

Introducing the Seminar and Global Policy Insights, Executive President and Co-Founder, Uday Nagaraju highlighted the role of GPI as a leading centrist think tank discussing topical issues like Brexit, which hold the capacity to reorder world systems and drastically affect the fate of international relations and politics.

## Our Vision and Methodology

At GPI we employ a unique approach to understanding the world and solving some of its most pressing policy issues based on insights from a wide array of epistemological branches and methodologies such as systems thinking, game theory, behavioural economics, statistical and narrative research, and historiography.



*Mr Uday Nagaraju*



*Mr Virendra Sharma*

The evening was opened by Virendra Sharma MP, Chair of the Indo-British All Party Parliamentary Group. Discussing the fundamental problems with Brexit, he expressed his skepticism with the decision to leave the EU. He raised the complex yet crucial issue of immigration and the potential skills deficit after reduced immigration from European nations, also pointing to the Government's White Paper on Immigration.



Lord Howell, President of the Royal Commonwealth Society and Chair of the House of Lords International Relations Committee, delivered the keynote address. Disregarding concerns about the ‘archaic nature’ of the Commonwealth, he affirmed that “the very structure that was dated, is now ideal for the digital age.” He highlighted that, unlike the EU, the Commonwealth demands no treaties or hierarchies, and this demonstrates its potential as a vehicle for developing connections between “open and like-minded democracies.” Rather than operating simply on WTO rules, the Commonwealth is a network of entities that depend on “trust and affinities” between one another.



**It is these factors that generate “no better focus for the British people as we step out of participation in the EU, than to dedicate ourselves to upholding and developing the Commonwealth network.”**

***Keynote Address by Lord Howell***

However, he stressed that the potential of the Commonwealth cannot be limited to trade, noting the benefits of a strong Commonwealth for international security, as well as furthering Britain’s soft power agenda.

Dr Joanna Newman, MBE, Chief Executive & Secretary General, The Association of Commonwealth Universities, echoed this sentiment in her address, describing the emergence of a new international education



***(L-R): Ms Seema Malhotra, H.E. Euripides Evriviades and Dr Joanna Newman***

strategy in which the Commonwealth features heavily.

She emphasised the need for cooperation and collaboration between Commonwealth countries with regard to higher education, especially considering how a large section of the young population lives in Commonwealth countries.

On the issue of whether the Commonwealth could replace the EU, the participants were united in agreeing that both entities are, and will remain, completely unlike one another.

H.E. Euripides Evriviades, High Commissioner of the Republic of Cyprus, pointed out that the Commonwealth is neither a “suitable nor sustainable” replacement for the EU. He underlined Cyprus’s positive reception of the UK’s restored interest in the Commonwealth, but warned that if the revival is perceived as a mere instrument for Brexiteers, it will fail.

**“If the revival of the Commonwealth is seen as an instrument of United Kingdom’s policy ‘#GlobalBritain’ because of Brexit, it will fail.”**



*H.E. Euripides Evriviades*



*Mr Sugeeshwara Gunaratna*

In a similar vein, Deputy High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Sugeeshwara Gunaratna, pointed out that the EU was formed to integrate an area united on geographical terms and a shared history, whereas the Commonwealth is something entirely different, expanding from North America to the Caribbean and Asia.

He proposed that the potential of the Commonwealth for Britain depends on “whether [Britain] decides to turn inwards or outwards, if it is going to embrace globalisation or nationalism, after leaving the EU.”

The weighty questions of the possible changes to the preferential trade and tariffs system, including the GSP+ Concessions and the linked effects of Britain’s economic management post-Brexit on the smaller economies of the Commonwealth were also raised.

The Deputy High Commissioner concluded his address on a note of optimism, pointing towards the growing sectors in the Commonwealth, which Britain could benefit from — if it chose to do so.

Seema Malhotra MP, Member of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Brexit and former Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury also emphasised the need to expand the partnership between the UK and Commonwealth countries which share strong cultural, community, asset and trade relationships.

Her concern of the Commonwealth not providing the geographical proximity which advantages trade within the EU resonated with the themes raised through the seminar.

**MP Seema Malhotra’s confidence in the UK-Commonwealth relationship emanated in her statement that “depending on which way we go with the politics of this country, either way the Commonwealth has got to be and remain a very big part of Britain’s future, as much as it has been Britain’s past.”**



The final panel of the evening opened the floor for senior business figures and decision-makers from Commonwealth countries to elaborate upon the potential trade opportunities generated by Britain’s departure from the European Union. Key questions raised in the panel ranged from discussions on expanding the infrastructural, political and economic capacities of the Commonwealth nations to exploring untapped sectors for expanding networks of trade relations, entrepreneurship and technical expertise between member states.



*The Panel in conversation (L-R): Ms Sabe Tibbitts, Mr Nathaniel Peat, Ms Neha Dewan, Mr Kalpesh Mehta and Mr James Kiiru*



*Mr Kalpesh Mehta*

While individual focus was accorded to larger Commonwealth nations like India and Canada, several opportunities in the sectors of alternative energy, development and capacity building were discussed in the context of growth markets in Kenya, Jamaica and Tanzania among others. The subject of expansion and competition between the economies of India and China was also raised, to which the panel offered pronounced insight.

The domination of China in infrastructure projects and its growing footprint as an investor in many Commonwealth regions would pose a strong competition to the UK, as Kalpesh Mehta, Chairperson, British Business Group Tanzania pointed out. Discussing the huge

opportunities in the oil and gas industries in Tanzania, he noted that the UK might be coming in late, but could pick up on the right opportunities with smart, strategic policies.

James Kiiru, Counsellor I Kenyan High Commission, UK however prompted that instead of seeing China as competition, nuanced and structural approaches to investment proposals should be made. For instance, he noted that UK could respond to the demands for investment in trade infrastructure, affordable healthcare, housing and food security which are crucial for nations like Kenya where development is a key priority.

Mutual benefits could also be obtained by such partnership, especially in meeting crucial climate goals, as Nathaniel Peat, Chairman of Jamaicans Inspired (UK) and Director JPAP emphasised. He expanded upon this discussion to include the potential of youth entrepreneurship, leadership and growing fields like renewable energy in the Commonwealth as hubs of opportunities for Britain.



*Mr James Kiiru*



*Mr Nathaniel Peat*



*Ms Sabe Tibbitts*

Sabe Tibbitts, Director, Kernel Consulting, Indo European Business Forum pointed to the huge amount of expertise that is unique to the UK to offer. Employment creation through investment in FDI initiatives and looking at maritime trade were two key points which according to her, should be taken up in the post-Brexit strategy. However, observing the reactions from the Commonwealth to new initiatives proposed in a post-Brexit order would be extremely crucial, in her judgement.

While the potential of the Commonwealth and even a common African market remains huge, some structural barriers to these opportunities were foreseen by the panelists. Despite strong historical links and economic partnerships, the difficulty of sustaining access to the free market and maintaining ties like the Caribbean-EU Economic Partnership, might impede improving prospects between the UK and the Commonwealth. The panel strongly agreed upon the need to share technical, academic and professional expertise, and stretching deeper partnerships across Commonwealth nations, but issues like rampant corruption within member states and the arduous reconciliation of politics and policies were major challenges brought out by panellists Nathaniel Peat and James Kiiru respectively.

Concluding on notes of confidence in the dynamic environment of Brexit, the panel called to attention, the need to build bridges across member nations, explore benefits from mutual expertise and policy developments to tackle on-ground challenges especially in less developed nations, SMEs and geographically distant Commonwealth nations.

The Seminar drew to a close with comments and questions from the audience and fellow dignitaries and an overview of the deliberations which spanned from security, technological partnerships to enhancing ties of trade, commerce and communities. GPI's efforts to bring together the political, professional and academic community in discussion culminated in significant outcomes, exploring the potential of structurally deeper partnerships and engagement between the Commonwealth countries and the UK. The opportunities and expertise unique to the Commonwealth were brought out, with a focus on collectively highlighting challenges and strategies to tackle them. The discussions ranging from concerns of international trade to security, to policy-making in education and infrastructure, provided a holistic image of what the future of the Commonwealth in a post-Brexit world could look like, if such active policy engagement and sustained efforts are made.

The Seminar was also noted in discussions of the House of Commons. Member of Parliament, Seema Malhotra referred to GPI during the Parliamentary Question Hour on international trade in her question to Dr Liam Fox, Secretary of State for International Trade (<https://goo.gl/zrrUJv>).