



ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

The Commonwealth: Towards Kigali 2021

Convened by the Royal Commonwealth Society
Moderated by Dr Linda Yueh, Chair

Thursday, 10 September 2020

About this report

With the delay to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kigali, Rwanda until 2021, the UK's Commonwealth Chair-in-Office period has been extended until next year and, importantly, in a post Brexit environment.

What will be on the trade and investment agenda for the UK, and the Commonwealth more broadly, during this period? What are the business opportunities? How has Covid affected the Commonwealth and Africa?

We were pleased to convene this important discussion, 'The Commonwealth: Towards Kigali 2021' on Thursday, 10 September 2020 and were delighted to be joined by a distinguished group of panellists:

- The Rt Hon. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Commonwealth and South Asia
- The Rt Hon. The Lord Mayor, Alderman William Russell
- Patricia Ithau, Regional Director, Stanford Institute for Innovation in Developing Economies

Moderator: Dr Linda Yueh, Chair, Royal Commonwealth Society

The Society would like to thank James Hedge for writing this report.

Discussion

The discussion opened with Dr Yueh reflecting on the cancellation of the High Commissioners' Banquet and the delay to CHOGM 2020 following the COVID-19 outbreak, and the impact that the latter has had in extending the UK's Commonwealth Chair-in-Office period until the rescheduled meeting in Kigali in 2021. In light of this, Dr Yueh posed a question to Lord Ahmad, asking what is on the UK's Agenda for the remainder of its time in office.

Lord Ahmad began by discussing the importance of uniting the Commonwealth's 2.4 billion citizens through working with the 54 Member States, the Commonwealth Secretariat and non-governmental organisations – the three pillar strategy the UK adopted during their period as Chair-in-Office. He commented that in recent months the Commonwealth has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by coming together as a Commonwealth family, with the defining insight of the pandemic being the realisation that we are interdependent.

The Minister highlighted the importance of the UK government pledging £769 million in aid to tackle coronavirus in vulnerable countries, as well as the importance of the joint statement released by the 54 member states of the Commonwealth, which included calls for global cooperation to ensure affordable access to health care. Looking ahead, Lord Ahmad stressed the importance of "working together to build back better", highlighting the need to protect employment, create opportunities for young people and focus on helping small and vulnerable states, especially with regards to promoting trade across the Commonwealth. Lord Ahmad further highlighted the UK's ambition to build on the successes of its time in office, referring to the publishing of the [UK Commonwealth Chair-in-Office report 2018-2020 delivery of Commonwealth Summit commitments](#) which gives an overview of Commonwealth outcomes and achievements based on the commitments made at

CHOGM 2018. Lord Ahmad specifically highlighted the impact of the Clean Oceans Alliance in promoting sustainability across the Commonwealth as well as the role of UK-funded Cyber Security capacity-building programmes in promoting security. Lord Ahmad also praised the work of the [Equality and Justice Alliance](#), a programme delivered by the Society in partnership with three other organisations, commenting that because of this programme six countries have repealed or reformed discriminatory laws. Finally, in addition to referring to the success of the £500 million of UK-funded programmes, Lord Ahmad also stressed the UK's continued ambition to promote equality for women in business and work collaboratively with member states to boost intra-Commonwealth trade. The theme of working in partnership across the Commonwealth, in line with the three pillar strategy, came through strongly.

Similarly, the Lord Mayor also reflected on the opportunities provided by the extension to the UK's time as Commonwealth Chair-In-Office, commenting specifically on the role the City of London can play in the lead up to the CHOGM Business Forum. The Lord Mayor reflected on the resilience of sustainable investing and discussed the importance of ensuring that as we 'build back better' following the COVID-19 pandemic, we do so in a way that ensures a green recovery. He also highlighted the opportunity for Commonwealth partnerships to form through the Sustainable Infrastructure Summit, Impact Investing Institute and the Green Finance Institute as we look forward to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow in November 2021. Finally, the Lord Mayor also reflected on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the digitisation of working life, commending the fact that businesses have adapted quickly to implement digitisation plans in a matter of months, given that these previously would have taken years.

Following on from the Lord Mayor's remarks, Dr Yueh introduced Patricia Ithau and asked her to offer her thoughts on how businesses should strategise in the Commonwealth. Ms Ithau commented that the most important lesson to be drawn from the COVID-19 crisis is that businesses should prioritise protecting livelihoods. She suggested that the crisis has helped validate the mantra that purpose is more important than profit and cited the need to ensure business strategies account for the need to promote sustainable growth. Ms Ithau also commented on the wide range of opportunities that the Commonwealth offers for businesses hoping to achieve such objectives. She highlighted how the Commonwealth can take advantage of its diversity, while stressing the need to build on its established ties to strengthen trade, noting that in a post-Brexit environment there is a role for the UK to play in establishing new trading relationships across the Commonwealth. In light of this, Ms Ithau urged businesses to lobby governments to reduce protectionism and promote international collaboration. Looking at this issue on a more micro-level, she expressed enthusiasm about the current generation of entrepreneurs across the Commonwealth, noting that young people are guided by a philosophy that stresses the need to leverage new technologies in order to nurture opportunity. She further stressed that on a societal level, we should look forward to a future where businesses collaborate for purpose rather than competing for profit.

Looking ahead to Kigali 2021, Dr Yueh asked Lord Ahmad to comment on the outcomes that the UK would like to see during its extended time as Commonwealth Chair-In-Office ahead of handing over the chair role to Rwanda. Lord Ahmad highlighted the importance of ensuring continuity and spoke of the work that he has done, as Minister for the Commonwealth, in working together with Rwanda in the lead up to CHOGM. He cited the decision to choose 'Delivering a Common Future' as the overarching theme for CHOGM 2020 as a demonstration of how Rwanda intends to build on the progress of CHOGM 2018, the theme for which was 'Towards a Common Future'. Reflecting on the words of the Lord Mayor, Lord Ahmad also highlighted the need to promote sustainability and argued that the pandemic has focused our minds in terms of showing how technology can be used to promote opportunities. Finally, Lord Ahmad commented on the importance of prioritising

inclusivity whether that be increasing attainment in education in 'hard to reach places' or with regards to healthcare provision in remote parts of the Commonwealth.

Reflecting on the discussions about improving trade relationships across the Commonwealth, Dr Yueh asked the Lord Mayor to comment on what opportunities exist for Commonwealth countries in a post-Brexit environment. The Lord Mayor outlined the scope there is for further cooperation between member states, both in the context of Brexit and the pandemic. He discussed his own experiences of meeting with international partners online, noting that restrictions on travel have not compromised these relationships, in fact, he has been able to meet with a greater number of partners than would otherwise have been possible. The Lord Mayor also made specific reference to the work the City of London has been doing to strengthen the UK's ties with Australia, and that progress towards a new Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was advanced. In light of the positive progress being made in this area, the Lord Mayor stressed the opportunities that would be provided by the UK signing new FTAs with countries across the Commonwealth.

Dr Yueh asked Patricia Ithau to comment on what she identifies as the pitfalls to avoid when doing business in the Commonwealth, to which Ms Ithau responded that businesses should not make the mistake of pursuing profits in the short term instead of championing sustainability in the long term. She also highlighted the importance of approaching local challenges with a global outlook given that we are living in an increasingly interdependent world where global connections can be harnessed for good. Ms Ithau also commented on the lack of a Commonwealth-wide FTA and the fact that gradual convergence of trade standards has been slow, making market access difficult for many businesses. Looking forward, Ms Ithau therefore stressed the need to recognise that smaller countries need to be supported with increasing their competitiveness.

In closing the discussion, Dr Yueh asked the three speakers to offer one piece of advice for businesses and charities working across the Commonwealth. Patricia Ithau responded by suggesting businesses and charities partner with local actors and prioritise purpose over profit. The Lord Mayor followed this by suggesting that businesses and firms should recognise that the Commonwealth provides a large pool of global talent that can be utilised. He highlighted the fact that in a world where work is increasingly being conducted online, talent from across the Commonwealth is now far more accessible and given that 20 of the world's top emerging cities are in the Commonwealth, it is clear that diversity and inclusion can be harnessed for the benefit of businesses. Finally, Lord Ahmad stressed the need to help facilitate intra-Commonwealth trade to help businesses with cash flow challenges, highlighting how the flow of payments can be eased through trade facilitation.

Dr Yueh drew the discussion to a close by highlighting the discussion's focus on the need to 'build back better' after the COVID-19 pandemic and work to take advantage of technology and diversity in order to increase opportunities, including for young people. Dr Yueh highlighted the unique role the Commonwealth family can play in this given its shared values and institutions, as well as the rich initiatives that are taking shape in the lead up to the rescheduled CHOGM in Kigali.