



**A Lecture in response to Lord Howell's paper titled  
'A Post Neo-Conservative Foreign Policy'**

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I'm delighted that an invitation issued by Michael Ancram at the end of October 2006 has finally brought about this opportunity for me to address the Global Strategy Forum, and in particular to respond to Lord David Howell's paper entitled 'A *Post Neo-Conservative Foreign Policy*'.

Water has gone under the bridge since then, but I'd like to refer you to small political developments in this country, which are relevant in the context of today's meeting. I have two Labour stories, the first of which sounds positively Churchillian.

Gordon Brown, speaking in India in January, saw three strands of a new-look UK foreign policy. I quote: "The American alliance we have, the European cooperation that we welcome and are going to strengthen in the years to come, and our role in the Commonwealth, are the basis on which we move forward." Unquote. Shades of Winston Churchill in 1948, and his three 'concentric circles' of UK foreign policy.

The second was the prompt for a good and strong opinion piece by Michael Binyon in *The Times* in March, in which Margaret Beckett is quoted as saying that it is time to look afresh at the Commonwealth. That may well have something to do with my diary entry for 30<sup>th</sup> January: 'Lunch – Beckett, M.'

Meanwhile on the Tory side...

I had a long meeting with William Hague and his team last June – simply, reminding him of what we are all about. And, David Cameron spoke at the Royal Commonwealth Society last Commonwealth Day, and acknowledged our role as part of the cement that binds this country, and this world. I'm currently talking with Richard Luce about a debate on the Commonwealth in the Lords, which he hopes will follow.

And I can also update you on how the Conservative Party is working at the coalface of establishing democracy in the Commonwealth. It has formed a supportive association with the opposition MDP party in the Maldives. This is a big help to a country which is going through an important process of political dialogue and reform, and developing a multi-party system, with the assistance of the Commonwealth's 'Good Offices' function.

So is something afoot between the UK and the Commonwealth?

Not necessarily, because with the Commonwealth, like the Empire before it, this country experiences arguments and counter-arguments, winds and counter-winds.

Even the growth of the Empire was seen as an unnecessary millstone around this country's neck, and there were many arguments about how it could be translated into a body to retain UK influence, at the lowest cost.

Reading the biographies and reports of my three predecessors as Commonwealth Secretary-General, I have been conscious that the tensions they have experienced have generally been about what the UK might call ‘keeping the Commonwealth in its place’.

In the course of my political years both in New Zealand and here, I have dealt with Foreign Secretaries Hurd, Rifkind, Cook, Straw and Beckett. Naturally, they had nothing but the UK’s interests at heart. Within that, they have always been warm towards the Commonwealth, but that warmth hasn’t always permeated down to all officials.

In fact, for as long as I’ve been listening to the debate, it seems that the political class of the Commons and Lords has more faith in the Commonwealth than the officials that serve them.

So today, what I’d like to do is to interweave the theme of the UK and its foreign policy relationships, and the theme of the Commonwealth (beyond the UK) as the best exemplar and advocate for multilateralism. I’ll attempt four simple things: to examine David Howell’s start-point; then my own; then to see where we diverge; and then where we converge.

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#### THE HOWELL START-POINT

So my words today must in part respond to David Howell’s paper of October 2006. That paper followed a previous one in which he memorably described the Commonwealth as a ‘Neglected Colossus’.

The paper is well written and well argued. David’s focus is primarily on two countries: the UK and the US. I hope not too crudely, this is how I summarise it:

- The world’s sole – current – superpower, the US, badly needs what he calls ‘candid friends’.
- The UK, meanwhile, needs *different* friends from the two to which it has, as he calls it, ‘sub-contracted’ its foreign policy. Those being the US; and the EU through its Common Foreign and Security Policy.
- The solution for both the UK and the US, says David, is the Commonwealth. He calls it, quote, ‘the ideal model for international relations in the new conditions the world faces’, unquote. He goes on to catalogue the many ways in which the Commonwealth can – and does – make waves. To the UK, the Commonwealth can be the new nexus of a new foreign policy, he says; and to the US, it can be a counterpoint as well as a partner.
- David talks of the Commonwealth both as it is, and as it might be, in what he had earlier called ‘Commonwealth Mark II’. This is a version – both enlarged *and* diminished – which comprises current members like the UK, Australia, New Zealand and India, and even new like-minded members like Japan, Poland, the Czech Republic, the three Baltic States, and Italy.

I will return later to more of the subtleties and details of David’s argument, but that – I think – is the sum of it. That is the starting point you have given me today.

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#### THE McKINNON START-POINT

My own starting point is rather different.

I don't with 2 but with 53 countries – big and small, rich and poor, land-locked and island, home to people of every colour and creed – African, Asian, Pacific, European, Caribbean and North American. The Commonwealth.

I fully endorse one of David's opening remarks, that: 'Effective foreign policy needs partners and allies'. A foreign policy also needs values: standards and aspirations that a country expects of itself, and indeed of others.

It also needs an element of enlightened self-interest from the richer and bigger countries, to promote the interests of the poorer and the smaller. That becomes ever more the case in a globalised, inter-dependent world.

But so much for the principle .... bring on the practice. Foreign policy also naturally recognizes that countries' concerns and interests are, first and foremost, their own. And Governments need to prove to their citizens that their external relationships bring dividends.

Which leads us to multilateralism – this complex web of external relationships – which countries pick up and use at different times for their own and for others' good.

I have never doubted, for instance, that our Caribbean members will juggle Commonwealth membership against their belonging to CARICOM, the OECS, NAFTA or the OAS. The same for our African members and the AU, ECOWAS, COMESA, NEPAD or SADC. So for Canada and the OAS, the OECD, the G8, NAFTA or La Francophonie. So for South Asia with SAARC or SAFTA; South-East Asia with ASEAN; the Pacific with the Pacific Islands Forum or APEC; and our three European members (UK, Cyprus and Malta) with the EU and NATO.

If any of those bodies aren't worth their subscription, they simply won't get them. Some will come in and out of focus and favour. And of course, in this 'alphabet acronym soup', one body transcends them all: the UN.

This is the nature of multilateralism.

Multilateralism is at the very centre of our Commonwealth being. It gives us our moral authority, and the power of our combined voice. It's enhanced by speaking the 'same language' - not just English, but the shared language of institutions, parliaments, legal and education systems. It is the multilateralism which gives voice to those who are not often heard – especially our 32 officially designated 'small states'. It derives from the power of family. It works by invitation not intervention. It brings together Commonwealth Heads of Government every two years – informally, and extraordinarily productively. It's how we hold each other accountable, to the Commonwealth guiding principles agreed in Singapore in 1971 and Harare in 1991. Principles that, if they are breached, can lead to suspension, as is currently the case for Fiji, and as hangs in the air – again – with Pakistan.

It means that we are more than a Commonwealth of Governments – but a Commonwealth of peoples, and specifically of civil society organizations all around the world. It's the multilateralism of 'consensus', where all of our decisions are communally reached. Consensus is sometimes hard to achieve, but it's what we do, and it's always the best platform from which to go forward. It's by consensus that we have seen the Commonwealth's fundamental values defended and extended, year by year.

Now I don't think either David or anyone else in this room would contest that vision of multilateralism, or the way that the Commonwealth carries it out. Both David and I are in fact mixing principle and pragmatism – he from a UK perspective, me from a Commonwealth perspective. The Commonwealth has no greater advocate than David, who is effusive about what he terms 'the unloved ugly duckling that has become the true swan', and I thank him for that.

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### HOWELL-MCKINNON DIVERGENCE

But I query the way David then *applies* the multilateral vision to the state of the world, especially for the UK.

Let me look now at how David and I diverge.

In essence, I disagree in three areas: about the EU and the US; about his concept of an extended 'Commonwealth Mark II'; and – to a certain extent – about the underlying UK understanding of the Commonwealth.

My best recipe for UK foreign policy is the three-pronged Churchillian one, as put forward by Gordon Brown....

.... because it's quite possible to be good Trans-Atlanticists, Europeans, *and* good Commonwealthers, and still sleep straight in bed at night.

In fact (speaking as a former Foreign Minister of ten years for an island nation dependent on global trade for its living), *every* relationship should be pursued and exploited and nurtured for the national good.

I am very much at odds with David on his stance on both the US and the EU.

#### ***Divergence 1<sup>st</sup> of 3: The EU and the US***

The UK's future is with America and Europe – ties of history, principle and pragmatism dictate that. It's far too easy to criticize both of these partners.

I prefer to look at the US as the moving force in putting an end to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World Wars, and the Cold War. It is this country's oldest ally. 'Great things we feel in our souls', wrote Herman Melville of his fellow Americans, and I agree. The US believes in the democracy it preaches. We can argue until the cows come home about some people's interpretations of 'mid-West' versions of democracy being imposed on Middle-Eastern countries, but we can't argue about democracy as the way by which people have a say in how they are governed.

The EU, meanwhile, is the body which has reunited a continent with shared values. It continues to do so: its assistance coupled with political dialogue, for instance, is highly effective in the Balkans. Like the Commonwealth, it is a union of proud and independent nation states.

Geographic proximity, economic necessity and the offer of those Four Freedoms of Movement, shared challenges, the political weakness of the one and at least the potential strength of the many: *all* of these tell you that your future is in Europe. I disregard the EU's current political and economic sluggishness: I think its forward momentum will continue.

David talks of ‘British identity’ needing to be taught as ‘British-Commonwealth’ identity. Yes, but by exactly the same token it should be taught as ‘British-European’ identity. There was traffic across the Channel before people crossed oceans.

David says the UK should shift its focus from the EU and the US, and onto the Commonwealth, as if it can’t and shouldn’t attempt to do all three at the same time. Not so!

Indeed, let me say clearly that if the UK shifts further to the Commonwealth, it will in fact be *strengthening* its ties with those two other partners, the EU and the US.

Just to take one recent example: the EU, the US’ National Democratic Institute and the Commonwealth kept in very close contact in the recent Nigerian elections. And, however independently, they spoke with one, very critical voice.

Meanwhile I am in Washington at least once a year. Last time I spoke with Dick Cheney, Susan Schwab, Robert Zoellick, a Deputy Secretary and several Assistant Secretaries in the State Department. Our talks focused on Pakistan and Africa. Every time, my message there is the same: I stress the power of multilateralism and of achieving things by consensus.

Likewise, I am in Brussels twice a year, and will be speaking at the European Parliament in September. Jose Manuel Barroso and I are regularly in contact – we have an ongoing political dialogue and our organizations work together on aid programmes..

All my dealings with the AU tell me that that body sees the EU as a model, for political and economic co-existence. The Commonwealth’s best cooperation with the EU is even now taking shape in proposals for joint support of governance in public institutions in Africa. All this is done with the AU as our partner.

Europe and the Commonwealth have more in common than just three shared members: we have clear synergies. And in Africa, the EU has seen the value of the access and the partnership we in the Commonwealth offer them.

Meanwhile I am also at odds with David over his idea of an expanded Commonwealth, particularly as a counterpoint to the US.

### ***Divergence 2<sup>nd</sup> of 3: An expanded Commonwealth?***

For starters, the Commonwealth can’t counter-balance the US/China axis, partly because of the very *nature* of its strength. It is not, of course, a military strength. It’s the unspoken, unthreatening but very real power of family and moral authority.

‘Commonwealth Mark II’ can’t and won’t be a natural counterpoint to the US. That is looking at multilateralism through bilateral spectacles. The point of multilateralism is that it embraces everyone, giving as much equality of time and voice as possible to all.

That’s why it’s hard work and can rarely achieve the quick wins of bilateral foreign policy. But it is also the case that global problems need global solutions and frameworks. All countries can use multilateralism to advance their national interests, but none can successfully use it effectively as a substitute for good bilateral relations ... and vice-versa.

The ‘Commonwealth Mark II’ of places like Japan and the Czech Republic simply won’t work. It’s an artificial construct. It lacks the bonds of some of the key ingredients that make



the Commonwealth so unique: language, education, culture, laws, a civil society network. We can't shoe-horn together those who don't want to be together or don't feel they belong together.

Please note that I am *not* ruling out new Commonwealth members here. On the contrary – as our criteria for membership and our organization adapt over time, others may seek to join, and our door is not closed to those who share our values and meet our membership criteria. Some of you will know that we have received overtures, not least from Rwanda, Algeria, Yemen. We have been and we are successful because we are the sum of voluntarily constituted parts. We have evolved with the times. And as and when we do expand, we will ensure that we keep the coherence – including language – which keeps us intimate and functional.

The fact is, that the Commonwealth is *already* widely engaged with the wider world, without having to recruit new and unlikely members. Recently I met the Secretary-General of ASEAN – soon, of the OIC.

Oumar Konare, the Malian President who was last year Chairman of the AU, told me then that while he couldn't see any case for wider African membership of the Commonwealth, he actively wanted our closer engagement with the AU.

I never cease to trumpet the fact that the Commonwealth's debt management software is now translated into 56 languages, including Chinese.

We are in conversation with different regions; and we are increasingly in collaboration with UN agencies, the World Bank, the WTO.

I am proud of the fact that in my 7 years as Secretary-General, the Commonwealth has for the first time looked *out* on the world, and not *in* on itself. We are seen to be a major player in our two key, and inter-locking, spheres of Democracy and Development.

These, then, are some of the ways in which I think David and I diverge – however subtly – on multilateralism.

### ***Divergence 3<sup>rd</sup> of 3: The UK and the Commonwealth***

Perhaps we also diverge on what I suspect is his UK-centric view of the Commonwealth.

Britain cannot seem to find the middle ground between thinking that it still owns the Commonwealth, and disowning it altogether. I suspect that many in the UK still see the Commonwealth through 1950s – even 1940s – lenses.

The UK is in a unique and difficult spot. If it uses us too much, it reinforces the very wrong assumption that it is still the British Commonwealth. If it holds back, it is accused of ignoring this invaluable asset which others have tried to copy, and which so many others would give their eye teeth to have in their foreign policy armoury.

The UK has to pick the right issues in which to get involved.

I recently advised the senior British official at a Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting 'not to sweat the small stuff'. I said he should first look around the table and remember, that despite all the good this country might have done, at one or more times in their history 52

Commonwealth countries have had their teeth knocked out or their shins kicked by a British Government, and they don't forget.

Much of what I read about the Commonwealth in this country still seems to think that the UK owns it.

The recent story about alleged racism against Commonwealth soldiers in the UK army is a case in point. It implies 'them' working for 'us', not *with* us. Ownership not partnership.

The same might be said of the arguments over the Commonwealth Institute building in Kensington High Street. There was precisely no pan-Commonwealth reason for it being there, even if various British voices wanted us to retain the building, or be short-changed on its sale. And with that recent sale, at last that charity will be able to fulfill its mandate to support education in the developing world – where 30 million Commonwealth children do not so much as go to primary school.

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### HOWELL-MCKINNON CONVERGENCE

But in asking questions of some of David's ideas, am I saying that the UK should not use the Commonwealth? Of course not! In essence, I am in full agreement with him that the UK has paid too little attention to the Commonwealth, and – with him – I call on the UK to re-evaluate the relationship. Whether it's the FCO or the CFO, there must at least be a C in it.

Part of me would even like to see progress on the occasional murmurs about taking the Commonwealth Secretariat *away* from London, just to see if it spurs anyone here into righteous indignation and action to preserve the pearl in your midst.

Every citizen of this country spends £50 a year on being a member of the EU. He or she also spends £10 a year on NATO, £2 on the UN and 20p on the Commonwealth – the price of a 2<sup>nd</sup> class stamp. Does that not tell you something of our current value?

The Commonwealth is a natural constituency for the UK. Its priorities are the UK's. Its members are the UK's friends. Its members will stand with the UK on international issues: we probably supplied the UK with a clean sweep of Commonwealth votes at the IOC when it secured the 2012 Olympics.

The irony of the FCO's 2006 update to its earlier *Active Diplomacy* strategy document, is that its priorities are almost exactly the same as Commonwealth's. The document quite rightly stresses the primacy of *partnership* in meeting the UK's and the world's challenges. It talks of fighting terrorism and international crime; managing migration; supporting development underpinned by democracy; resolving conflict through a 'strong international system'.

These are the UK's issues; they are the Commonwealth's; they are the world's. David is right that the Commonwealth's multilateral, consensual, trusted, incremental, networked approach can be extraordinarily productive in areas like climate change, and trade, and debt, and education, and conflict resolution through discreet diplomacy.

I choose the expression 'crowded highway' to point to the many lanes and speeds of multilateralism, and cars' ability to weave among them. The UK has to move along that freeway as well. It needs the Commonwealth – and yes, it can and should use it so much more



– but it needs the Americans and the Europeans too. I believe that Gordon Brown was right. He is this country's next Prime Minister: so let's see if the proof is in the pudding.

To move the Commonwealth to where Lord Howell wishes it would be to change the Commonwealth fundamentally – so much so, that its current strength and values would be lost.

I leave you with what I believe to be a wise and prescient comment from the very first person in my job, the Canadian Arnold Smith.

*'The Commonwealth may just prove to be the best and most lasting legacy of the British Empire.'*

Thank you.

**ENDS**