

The Commonwealth – more than just trading partners

✖ A few days ago, we published an article discussing the development of a Commonwealth Free Trade area. However, the links with these nations goes deeper than just trade.

There is a common language which binds the 53 Commonwealth nations together – English. With few exceptions, their legal systems are based on the bottom-up principles of English Common Law rather than the top-down Continental Corpus Juris. At a personal level, we are more likely to have relations living in a Commonwealth country than in an EU member state. As one Labour MP recently expressed it, “Everyone has relatives in...Canada. Most have no one in Europe except the dead of the two wars.” Only the USA and the Irish Republic have any historical or emotional ties to the UK comparable with those of the Commonwealth countries.

For white British people, the first nations that are likely to come to mind when we think of the Commonwealth would be Australia, Canada or New Zealand, but the links between the UK and other Commonwealth countries also run pretty deep. When the first Jamaican immigrants arrived in the UK on board the Emperor Windrush in 1948, one passenger, a Calypso singer called Aldwyn Roberts, spoke for many of his compatriots when he said, “The feeling I had to know that I’m going to touch the soil of the mother country; that was the feeling I had.” Until the eastward enlargement of the EU in 2004, seven of the ten largest foreign-born communities in the UK came from Commonwealth countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Africa, Jamaica, Australia and Kenya. These ties go back a long way. During the two World Wars, soldiers from what are now Commonwealth nations fought alongside their British compatriots. The Commonwealth War Graves committee has details of no fewer than 1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen who were

killed in these two conflicts, along with 67,000 Commonwealth civilians "killed by enemy action."

Of course, the relationship between our country and its colonies was not always harmonious. The Amritsar Massacre of 1919 and the strong-arm tactics used in Kenya against the Mau Mau movement in the 1950s are two of the less savoury incidents in the history of the British Empire. Nor have immigrants from our former colonies necessarily always been welcomed in the UK. Nonetheless, the passage of time has healed many of these wounds and there remains much goodwill towards us from our former colonies. Even in 2014, the disparate nations of the Commonwealth remain a far more natural "family" than the artificial construct of the EU, as the recent Commonwealth Games have illustrated.

And it is a voluntary family from which departure is pretty easy should a nation so desire, but so far, very few countries have chosen to do. The Irish Republic took no further part in meetings of heads of state after 1932 and more recently, Zimbabwe and the Gambia have left. On the other hand, Rwanda and Mozambique, former colonies of Belgium and Portugal respectively, have become members in spite of the lack of any historical ties to the UK. Joining the Commonwealth does not involve surrendering or pooling sovereignty. You do not have to submit to the Queen as head of State and you are not bossed around by faceless bureaucrats. The Commonwealth Secretariat has only 300 staff, less than 2% of the 23,615 employees of its nearest equivalent – the European Commission.

The Commonwealth epitomises how good we are in the UK at creating multi-national institutions which work well and do not run out of control. Ironically, what could have been another UK success in this field, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), designed as an alternative to the EU which preserved national sovereignty, suffered a blow when we withdrew to join the EEC in 1973. This does beg the question as to why we are bothering to be involved with a multinational

institution which is so inferior to anything we would have designed and which forces us to prefer nations with whom we have very little in common to our real friends in the world. We can only hope that we can correct our misalignment soon and that our commonwealth friends will forgive us this wrong.

Photo by Foreign and Commonwealth Office 