

HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on International Relations

2nd Report of Session 2017–19

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018

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Select Committee on International Relations

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<u>Lord Balfe</u>	<u>Lord Howell of Guildford</u> (Chairman)
<u>Baroness Coussins</u>	<u>Lord Jopling</u>
<u>Lord Grocott</u>	<u>Lord Purvis of Tweed</u>
<u>Lord Hannay of Chiswick</u>	<u>Lord Reid of Cardowan</u>
<u>Baroness Helic</u>	<u>Baroness Smith of Newnham</u>
<u>Baroness Hilton of Eggardon</u>	<u>Lord Wood of Anfield</u>

Declaration of interests

See Appendix 1.

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Committee staff

The staff who worked on this inquiry were James Whittle (Clerk) and Sophie Jade Taylor (Committee Assistant).

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Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018

1. In April 2018 the UK will host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London. The meeting will mark the start of the UK's two years as Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth.
2. The meeting was to be held in Vanuatu until the damage caused by Cyclone Pam in 2015 made that impossible. The Commonwealth asked the UK to host the meeting and David Cameron, then Prime Minister, agreed.
3. The International Relations Committee took evidence on the UK's preparations and priorities for the meeting from Tim Hitchens (Chief Executive of the Commonwealth Summit Unit, Cabinet Office) and Richard Oppenheim (UK Commonwealth Envoy, Foreign and Commonwealth Office).
4. The theme for CHOGM 2018 is "Towards a common future". Mr Hitchens said this theme related not just to the next two years but to "the role of the Commonwealth in the 21st century."¹
5. The theme comprises four elements:
 - A more prosperous future, aimed at promoting trade and investment within the Commonwealth;
 - A more sustainable future, focusing on climate change and improving the resilience of member states to natural disasters;
 - A more secure future, addressing the threats posed by organised crime, cyber crime, violent extremism and human trafficking;
 - A fairer future, promoting the principles enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter of democracy, good governance, human rights and the rule of law.
6. The Heads of Government meeting will be preceded by four forums:
 - The Commonwealth Youth Forum, bringing together young leaders from around the Commonwealth;
 - The Commonwealth Women's Forum, to discuss the role of women in promoting the values of the Commonwealth;
 - The Commonwealth Business Forum, comprising business leaders from across the Commonwealth;
 - The Commonwealth People's Forum, providing an opportunity for civil society organisations to meet.
7. Mr Hitchens said these forums went "to the heart of what the Commonwealth stands for" as an organisation made up of a network of

1 [Q2](#) (Tim Hitchens)

“many intergovernmental, parliamentary, professional and civil society bodies.”²

8. In hosting the summit, Mr Hitchens said that the UK’s aim was “to run the best summit that London and the Commonwealth have ever seen” and “to help to rejuvenate the Commonwealth so that ... [it] takes its place once more as one of the significant international organisations”.³ Achieving these aims would benefit the UK as it would reinforce “the position of Britain in the Commonwealth” and “advance Britain’s reputation ... around the world for being a fair and good host.”⁴
9. Throughout our discussion, Mr Hitchens was clear that the UK’s role at CHOGM was to work on behalf of the Commonwealth’s 52 member states: “we are not the bosses”.⁵ However, Mr Hitchens also identified some specific opportunities for the UK. He said that re-engaging with the Commonwealth by hosting CHOGM would provide opportunities to “strengthen relationships in groupings in the Commonwealth”, which would “be as important in the long run for British foreign policy ... as anything else.”⁶ Increasing engagement with the Commonwealth would allow the UK “to be global in a way that we perhaps had not been before.”⁷ He said that Commonwealth countries would “feature large in British foreign policy” and referred in particular to “the growing importance of the Asian Pacific region”.⁸ Mr Oppenheim highlighted the importance of countries like India, Canada and Australia, and said the UK wanted “to use this opportunity to draw them closer in terms of the Commonwealth and use the Commonwealth and our relationship with them bilaterally.”⁹
10. Mr Hitchens said that the UK’s aim was to ensure that what was agreed at the meeting was “not just words but has money and commitments underneath it.” As Chair-in-Office, the UK would “make sure that the things that are promised in London are delivered on time, and that, if they are not, people are held accountable”.¹⁰
11. On the UK’s increased engagement with the Commonwealth in the light of Brexit, Mr Hitchens noted that the decision to host CHOGM had been taken before the EU referendum. The Government would have “increased our engagement with the Commonwealth irrespective of which way the referendum might have gone ... any Government with this kind of opportunity in front of them ... would be making the most of the Commonwealth links and trying to rejuvenate them.”¹¹
12. It was not constructive to treat the Commonwealth and the EU as an “either/or” decision. In evidence to this Committee in 2016, Baroness Scotland of Asthal, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, called it “a false dichotomy.”¹² Mr Hitchens said the Commonwealth was “a very different

2 The Commonwealth, *Charter of the Commonwealth*, March 2013: <http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/page/documents/CharteroftheCommonwealth.pdf> [accessed 30 January 2018]

3 [Q 1](#) (Tim Hitchens)

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 [Q 5](#) (Tim Hitchens)

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 [Q 5](#) (Richard Oppenheim)

10 [Q 3](#) (Tim Hitchens)

11 [Q 4](#) (Tim Hitchens)

12 Oral evidence taken on 20 July 2016 (Session 2016–17), [Q 4](#) (Baroness Scotland of Asthal)

kind of beast” to the EU. He referred to its greater global reach and its different “economic heft”. Mr Hitchens emphasised the networked nature of the Commonwealth: “in the relationships of the Commonwealth there are not just 52 ... it is not just the UK’s relationship with the other member states... it is a [multi-linked] network ... not a place with a centre.”¹³

13. Mr Hitchens confirmed the Government’s commitment to ensuring that no Commonwealth country would be disadvantaged by Brexit.¹⁴
14. A key value of the Commonwealth—set out in the Commonwealth Charter—is concern for human rights. The Charter states that such rights are “universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated and cannot be implemented selectively”. It continues: “We are implacably opposed to all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief or other grounds.”¹⁵ However, Mr Hitchens observed that “in a majority of Commonwealth states discriminatory laws still exist”¹⁶—the death penalty or criminalisation of homosexuality, for example. The Government’s approach was to ensure that human rights were discussed during CHOGM. The UK’s role was to “change hearts and minds”.¹⁷ He recognised that this would be a long process:

“The Commonwealth has moved over the years to take different positions, summit by summit, and there is a sense of progression. I think we will have some breakthroughs, but other things will have to be left to the next summit and some even beyond that.”¹⁸

15. Commenting on possible new Commonwealth members or associates, Mr Hitchens said “an organisation that has a queue for membership is always a healthy organisation”. He noted that since 2009 one country had joined (Rwanda) but two had left (The Gambia—which was now considering re-joining—and the Maldives). However, he said that “overall picture is of that tide being turned, of new members wanting to apply and of an increasing number of countries talking to the Secretary-General about this.”¹⁹ He also noted the Foreign Secretary’s view that it would be “a noble and glorious thing if Zimbabwe were able to return”.²⁰
16. **We welcome the UK’s hosting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and endorse the four themes of the meeting. We also welcome the strong priority given by the Government to preparations. We see this as a contrast to less positive Government attitudes in past decades toward the Commonwealth.**
17. **Although we appreciate the position of the UK as being the host to all the member states, we urge the Government to make clear to the public the potential benefits and new business opportunities for the UK and other member states.**

13 Q 4 (Tim Hitchens)

14 *Ibid.*

15 The Commonwealth, *Charter of the Commonwealth, Human Rights*, March 2013, p 3: <http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/page/documents/CharteroftheCommonwealth.pdf> [accessed 30 January 2018]

16 Q 6 (Tim Hitchens)

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 Q 8 (Tim Hitchens)

20 *Ibid.*

18. **The meeting has clear implications for the re-shaping of Britain's international relations in changed world circumstances, and would have done so regardless of the outcome of the Brexit referendum. The Government should use the meeting to reinvigorate our relations with Commonwealth members and to strengthen our diplomatic, trade, defence and security ties across the network.**
19. **We welcome the Government's focus on achieving clear commitments during the meeting and ensuring they are delivered during the UK's term as Chair-in-Office. There should be a strong focus on results and positive outcomes.**
20. **We hope that the Commonwealth will, in the conclusions of the meeting, express its full support for the strengthening of the rules-based international system.**
21. **We share the view of the Foreign Secretary that it would be very welcome if the countries which have left were willing and able to re-join the Commonwealth. In the case of Zimbabwe we would attach the greatest weight in that respect to the holding of free and fair elections with Commonwealth observers being given unfettered access.**
22. **We recognise that the Commonwealth works by consensus, and we note the Government view that in a majority of Commonwealth countries discriminatory laws still exist. We urge the Government to continue to take a robust position on all aspects of human rights, both at the forthcoming meeting and in the years ahead.**
23. **We recommend this report to the House and express the hope that it can be debated ahead of CHOGM in April.**

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF MEMBERS AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members

Lord Balfe
 Baroness Coussins
 Lord Grocott
 Lord Hannay of Chiswick
 Baroness Helic
 Baroness Hilton of Eggardon
 Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman)
 Lord Jopling
 Lord Purvis of Tweed
 Lord Reid of Cardowan
 Baroness Smith of Newnham
 Lord Wood of Anfield

Declarations of interest

Lord Balfe
None relevant to inquiry

Baroness Coussins
None relevant to inquiry

Lord Grocott
None relevant to inquiry

Lord Hannay of Chiswick
None relevant to inquiry

Baroness Helic
None relevant to inquiry

Baroness Hilton of Eggardon
None relevant to inquiry

Lord Howell of Guildford
Chairman, Council of Commonwealth Societies
President, Royal Commonwealth Society
Chairman, Commonwealth Exchange (interest ceased 13 June 2017)
Member, High Level Group on Commonwealth Governance

Lord Jopling
None relevant to inquiry

Lord Purvis of Tweed
Co-chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Trade Out of Poverty inquiry: "Can the Commonwealth help developing countries trade out of poverty?"

Lord Reid of Cardowan
None relevant to inquiry

Baroness Smith on Newnham
None relevant to inquiry

Lord Wood of Anfield
Chair, United Nations Association UK

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APPENDIX 2: LIST OF WITNESSES

Evidence is published online at www.parliament.uk/intl-relations and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074).

Alphabetical list of all witnesses

- * Mr Tim Hitchens, Chief Executive of the Commonwealth Summit Unit, Cabinet Office [QQ 1–8](#)
- * Mr Richard Oppenheim, UK Commonwealth Envoy, Foreign and Commonwealth Office [QQ 1–8](#)