

**An Aging State-Centered Mentality in a Changing International Context: Reflecting on the
Norms of the Commonwealth as a Multilateral Institution**

Julia E. Price

Dalhousie University

Halifax Overseas Club Essay

Word Count: 4086

January 30th, 2022

An Aging State-Centered Mentality in a Changing International Context: Reflecting on the Norms of the Commonwealth as a Multilateral Institution

In the midst of some of the greatest and most unique crises that the human world has faced to date, collaboration across institutions and global state and non-state actors is more imperative than ever. Unlike some crises of the past, like internal conflicts, the nature of both the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate change crisis know no borders. The current norms around the importance of the nation state and the significance of borders in how humans are governed and what nation they associate their identities with are unbeknownst to natural and environmental threats. Regardless of the nature of the threats faced by the global community, the operations of the modern international order have ceased to sufficiently change in response. This paper examines one such organization, the Commonwealth of Nations (or the Commonwealth) and how its structure and approach remains largely similar to that of over 70 years ago. By reflecting on Viscount Bruce of Melbourne's debate speech in 1948 as well as commentary from a debate in 2020, similarities across mentality and approaches can be found. Then, using constructivism for ontological analysis and a transformative approach to change, failing norms are identified and recommendations for new pathways are made.

Formed in 1931, the Commonwealth is composed of sovereign states, primarily the United Kingdom and its former dependencies, which aim to reach consensus through consultation on several important issues (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). It is unlike other international bodies as there are no formal laws or constitution tying members together and it is more values-based. There are currently 54 countries involved which govern a total of over 2.4 billion citizens (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). The overall goal is to work together so member governments can support political, social, and economic development for their citizens.

The Commonwealth holds a Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) every two years in which the state representatives gather to discuss a range of topics, especially those pertaining to geopolitics, the global economy, climate change, and human rights.

Christiana Figueres, the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC summarizes the need for multilateral solutions to climate change well. She emphasizes that the challenges facing the world, such as resource scarcity, environmental degradation, and population growth, are increasingly compounding (Figueres, 2012). In addition to this, climate change is a threat multiplier, meaning that even when its immediate effects are not clear, it increases the severity of other problems, such as the recurrence of conflict (Nordås & Gleditsch, 2007). Significant progress on reducing greenhouse gas emissions has been made by multilateral institutions and they are arguably moving in the right direction, but increasingly scientific reports indicate that the current speed and scale are simply not enough (Figueres, 2012). As a result, critics of multilateralism suggest that this inadequacy is because international policy is ineffective and slow; Figueres counters this by stating that the multilateral process is necessary but must become more interconnected with a bottom-up private sector approach (2012). Echoing this argument, Nikos Tsafos, Chair for Energy and Geopolitics at CSIS, believes that the problem is that “every international institution deals with climate change... but climate change is not a core function of these institutions” (2021). Multilateralism is still over centered on interaction between sovereign states to prevent conflict. Therefore, reform is needed to alter existing power structures and negotiation dynamics to shift the influence from traditional powers to the organizations and states most valuably contributing to the matters at hand (Figueres, 2012).

As the modern international order faces problems that are increasingly “global”, the normative operations of institutions and their top-down archaic approach must change in

response. If multilateralism is still the solution, what has this looked like for the Commonwealth and how might it need to look differently moving forward?

An Idealist Approach: Viscount Bruce of Melbourne, 1948

During a debate on Commonwealth Relations on the 17th of February 1948, Viscount Bruce of Melbourne raised important points about the direction of the Commonwealth. In his lifetime, Stanley Bruce acted as the Prime Minister of Australia, Australian delegate at the League of Nations, Fellow of the Royal Society and Chairman of the Food and Agricultural Organization (Menzies, 1970). He was known for being a world statesman and for creating highly idealistic schemes that often resulted in frustration at the challenges he faced trying to bring his ideas to fruition (Stirling, 1974). He advocated strongly for social and economic cooperation through equal opportunities for all nations, especially those that were previously under imperial rule (Radi, 2006).

As mentioned, his international relations views can be closely associated to liberalism and idealism meaning that institutions are seen to increase efficiency, cooperation is a rational strategy for countries to pursue, and that preferences and approaches in a global system will carry weight on nation's behaviours (Slaughter, 2011). Bruce begins his debate by identifying three possibilities for the future. First, the world will have complete international cooperation on the problems that it is affected by, and the United Nations will be effective in its operations on all fronts. The second is that groupings of nations will cooperate effectively, with the United Nations playing a more minor role. Thirdly, the outcome which he describes as disastrous, is that real cooperation is impossible, and the world becomes "dominated by power politics and by the ruthless ideals that some nations seem now to hold" (Bruce, 1948). He suggested that in order to achieve the first outcome, it is essential that the British nations work together. At the time, Bruce

felt that consultation was not taking place beyond the theatrics of it. That although the flow of information had dramatically increased, it was at least 90 percent from the United Kingdom outwards and not from the “Dominions” to the UK or amongst other nations themselves. Consultation must not simply be a last-minute discussion, as this has created unfortunate situations, but rather ongoing throughout the formation of policies and proposals so that cooperation becomes seamless at the point of implementation (Bruce, 1948). He saw that the “old mentality” was persisting far beyond its lifetime and that upon seeing a necessity for new action, the machinery should be created and adapted to make actions most effective (Bruce, 1948). He stressed that the idea is not to impose obligations upon any nation, the idea is to create space for a meeting of equals where leadership may come from one or it may just as likely come from the next.

Many of his words sound as though they could fit into a speech today such as his recognition of the urgency for states that are capable and ready to work together to create machinery to face dangers and that the stage of cooperation “leaves a great deal to be desired” (Bruce, 1948). Although highly idealist in nature, his vision of an international system of equals that genuinely root their shared interest in tackling the problems they are all burdened by still stands and has yet to be proven today. As such, this paper will consider another speech from 2020 alongside some present critiques to understand where Bruce’s vision has succeeded and failed.

Status and Critiques of the Commonwealth Today

The Commonwealth today seems to face similar structural issues as Bruce described in 1948. The following discussion of current themes derives from a debate held on Commonwealth Day on Monday March 9th, 2020. Russell-Moyle began by highlighting that the Commonwealth

is more necessary than ever in the wake of the conclusion of Brexit and in a time when human rights are being entirely disregarded by many governments; it is time for the Commonwealth to become more than just a name (Russell-Moyle, 2020). In this debate, Patrick Grady took a critical stance about the difference between the directives and ambitions of the Commonwealth, and the things that pan out in reality. He identifies false promises and gaps that are not fulfilled, such as the stance on LGBT rights. He says the “mismatch between rhetoric and reality is a bit of a theme on a number of issues” and blames some of this on the isolationist approach of the United Kingdom at the expense of multilateralism, which they exemplified in their choice to leave the EU (Patrick Grady, 2020). Other delegates respond to this criticism with hope that Brexit will allow the UK to play a greater role in the Commonwealth and establish stronger trade relations outside of Europe, which required greater sovereignty (Hunt & Beresford, 2020). This debate was just one conversation about the outlook for the coming year, however, the dialect seems to be largely bureaucratic and centered on how certain nations are not fulfilling their role and that the reality of many of their goals has not been achieved. There is very little mention of what needs to be done or how nations have been collaborating successfully on critical matters, such as climate change.

McDougall describes the contemporary role of the Commonwealth as a “mini version of multilateralism” (2018). On a visible level, it seems that this organization does not contribute much to the grand scale of things, but it is significant for some smaller states. It has not made notable advances on global trade, finance, or development issues but has created a forum for small island countries to be heard regarding climate change on the broader agenda (McDougall, 2018).

Once again, others feel that this is nowhere near enough and that “the failure to enforce norms of international law, especially those of such import as the prohibition on genocide, is the multilateralists’ Achilles heel” (Alvarez, 2000). What is normally done in the name of the collective, ends up becoming more unilateral as it serves only a few hegemonic states and not the vested interests of all communities (Alvarez, 2000). These words are in defiance of Bruce’s stated desire that all states must be equals in decision-making and that power is given to those in a most logical sense based their relative qualifications and relationship to action items. Multilateral institutions, like the Commonwealth, need to be analyzed to discover new pathways that are less unilateral and utilitarian (Alvarez, 2000).

Other critics have deemed the practices of the Commonwealth to be ineffective and outdated as well as inconsistently applied when dealing with human rights violations and authoritarian regimes (McBride, 2020). It is plagued by a lack of mechanisms to legitimately influence member behaviour when peer pressure doesn’t suffice. Its geopolitical relevance has been described as an “amiable delusion” especially given the minimal trade benefits it has generated (McBride, 2020). Referring back to Bruce’s three possible outcomes for the future, the research and current articles suggest that the Commonwealth falls much closer to the third scenario than the first. Nevertheless, that does not mean that this organization does not have great potential to generate change and become a cooperative engine. The next section will analyze why the third scenario seems to hold true and what has been missing from multilateralism through a constructivist lens.

Constructive Analysis

Constructivism is an ontological approach that becomes useful in analyzing how norms are created and how entities view themselves in the international system. It acknowledges that

society as it exists has been created by humans and can therefore, be dismantled and recreated by humans. Unlike some other theories, constructivism takes a broader approach and considers history, ideas, norms, and beliefs in order to explain behaviour and interests (Slaughter, 2011). Constructivism can explain both large and small-scale change, can interpret power and meaning from actions, and denaturalizes what is often taken for granted. It involves asking questions of “how” and “why” certain facts of life exist (Slaughter, 2011). As such, this theory will be useful in analyzing the similarities and differences between the Commonwealth in 1948 and 2020 and why changes may have or have not occurred. It will look at the established norms that are problematic in the current state of climate crisis and provide a useful avenue for discovering areas where a transformative approach can be employed.

Why has the Commonwealth fallen into Bruce’s third scenario, in which genuine cooperation is difficult and the world continues to battle with power politics? Perhaps when cooperation and collective action becomes challenging within an organization whose very mandate is to foster cooperation, something is wrong in the approach. A constructivist would wonder if the structure and priorities of the Commonwealth remain helpful. This brings the continued emphasis of the nation-state into question. Many of the problems multilateral organizations face in the 21st Century are inherently uninfluenced by borders or national laws. According to Thakur & Langenhove, this has created a “paradox of governance” because policy authority is still in the hands of states, while problem sources and research for solutions are often occurring at different levels, such as regional or transnational (2006). He argues that it is multilateralism’s continued dependence on the state that inhibits its core functionality (Langenhove, 2011). Yet, the Commonwealth decision-making system continues to be based on Heads of Nation States and a predominately top-down approach. Although his vision was also

fixated on nations as the sole actors, this fails to adhere to Bruce's warning that it will be critical to create and adapt the machinery to make actions most effective in response to external changes (Bruce, 1948). Has bringing nation states together to make decisions on climate change sufficiently done this? The Commonwealth's emphasis on cooperation and unity being at a formal high government level may result in tunnel vision regarding completely different approaches that could be led by non-governmental actors or cross-border initiatives. Langenhove also advocates for a more flexible system where the power of state and non-state actors hinges on certain dimensions rather than sovereignty and one "big" state may hold the same power as a certain region or one small state may equate to a sub-national region (2011). Another article argued that transnational networks that include both government and private domestic actors could accomplish far more than international workers representing a certain nation's interests (Alvarez, 2000). The stress of multilateral solutions having to appease the interests of the nation-states involved impedes the available solutions for global dilemmas (Alvarez, 2000). A core assumption of liberalism is that individuals and private groups are the fundamental actors in world politics, not just state actors (Slaughter, 2011). This core assumption has not been fulfilled in many liberal institutions where NGOs and research organizations do not hold power the same way governments do.

That being said, using constructivism, it is also important to consider what has changed and how that came to be. For example, the organization has become less imperially focused. The Commonwealth has changed the historical norms from being an organization of Britain and her Dominions to many nations that share ties or interest in collaborating with Britain. Power sharing may not be equal, but it is no longer imperial or hierarchical, it is more based on nation status on the world stage. It makes sense that this was able to be accomplished in a nation-state centred

system because the change itself depends on how the nations perceive one another and conduct themselves. It also seemed to be a high priority on the agenda to abolish the trends set by historical imperialism and give nations an opportunity to develop independently. The structure of the Commonwealth lent itself well to changing the norms around imperialism.

Constructivists also examine what entities are being assigned value and how this value is defined. For example, when multilateral organizations are dealing with the issue of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, states and actors are not incentivized to follow through on action items because the norms around environmental value are not prioritized. Multilateral institutions and states are in a critical position to redefine what is considered valuable on a global scale (Darling, 2012). In the present, economic growth and profit still reign superior over almost any other agenda item which inhibits change that benefits the environment because monetary gains are the logical choice over maintaining ecosystem health. These valuing systems are not without consequences, as we have seen, the value placed on economics can be largely credited to the creation of climate change. Still, the Commonwealth and other multilateral institutions continue to try to address climate risks within the same valuation system and framework that created them. To cite an ecological feminist perspective, “we are faced with an opportunity to create a system that respects the value and seeks the flourishing of life in all its forms” (Darling, 2012). Systems change is daunting and may seem drastic, but constructivists would argue that sometimes the scale of change must be drastic to match the scale of the problems being faced.

Transformative Approach and Recommendations

Constructivism is primarily an analysis tool and is limited in its ability to provide pathways for change beyond simply identifying why and how change might be needed (Slaughter, 2011). Therefore, a transformative approach will be employed to build upon the

thoughts provoked by constructivism and to envision some recommendations and potential pathways forward for the Commonwealth.

A transformative approach involves engaging the entire system by understanding that problems are interdisciplinary and complex and that it is important to see how all actors perceive them in an economic, social, and political lens. It considers the role of identity in decision-making and puts emphasis on empowerment and mutual recognition over efficiency (Burgess, 1997). Mutual recognition is especially crucial as it generates empathy for others; when trying to reach consensus, decision-making parties must balance their self-concern with concern for others. These seem like basic principles, but they are commonly lost when nations feel they must prioritize their self-interest in order to protect their values. This approach can prevent parties from realizing shared commonalities and agendas. Transformative theorists also acknowledge that when a state's identity is threatened instead of recognized and appreciated, consensus and cooperation become much more challenging (Burgess, 1997).

Within this framework, the Commonwealth would be able to alter the course of their traditional negotiation and decision-making processes in favour of systems change. By taking a step back and allowing all parties to re-evaluate their priorities and to mutually recognize where their needs are shared, a new meaning can be established within the organization. Open discussions should be had about whether addressing climate change beginning at the level of the nation-state, such as through nationally determined contributions (NDCs) makes the most sense, or if the organization would benefit from a reform that focuses less on borders and more on acting collectively. This may involve the inclusion of representatives of leading domestic researchers or private actors, it may mean cooperation between world cities, ideas that would not normally be considered amid the current "outmoded statism" (Alvarez, 2000).

Transformational approaches may also allow actors to realize where valuation has been misplaced. The limit on greenhouse gases is global and yet, the present norms and ongoings of the Commonwealth provide no legitimate reason for nation-states to cease emitting them. An alternative to placing less emphasis on the nation-state would be to take an eco-nationalist approach. This involves creating the norm that climate change is a legitimate and existential threat to all nation-states, beyond that of an economic recession, and must be counterbalanced (Matejova, 2021). Therefore, threats of environmental harm would become closely tied to their securitization logic, which in the current system, normally elicits the creation of prevention and adaptation measures.

International institutions have recognized the need for transformative change, as expressed in the United Nations Report on *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change* (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2017). In congruence with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda, the UN stated that:

“[The 2030 Agenda] can only be realized if the implementation process leads to transformative change addressing the root causes of inequitable and unsustainable outcomes. Transformative change therefore requires fundamental changes in social relations and institutions to make them more inclusive and equitable, as well as the redistribution of power and economic resources.” (UNRISD, 2017)

This statement shows how the United Nations is focusing on transforming the normative hierarchy to place ecological justice at the forefront of future policy making (UNRISD, 2017).

What could the Commonwealth do to fulfill this transformative change? The intent of this paper is not to make concrete recommendations but rather to open new thought pathways and encourage actors and multilateral institutions to rethink the norms and systems they both operate

within and perpetuate. The Commonwealth can shift the agenda from nation-state politics and economics to global cooperation on environmental justice. They can welcome private sector actors such as leading researchers and NGOs to share their contributions. They can place less of an emphasis on regulation, which is historically almost impossible for multilateral institutions to enforce and maintain, and shift the emphasis to innovation. The aforementioned debate on the Commonwealth in 2020 made no mention of such transformative and constructivist thoughts. It is not going to be simple, but this period also provides a great opportunity for the Commonwealth to come back together and truly collaborate to pioneer a new and innovative approach to multilateralism in response to the unique challenge it faces.

The foundations of idealism and liberalism as expressed by Bruce that the Commonwealth is built upon are not fallacy, but perhaps they have been misplaced. A transformative approach allows for the return to the basis of these ideals; a return to reworking the holistic interests of individuals, communities, organizations, and states alike to greater adhere to collaboration based on shared empathy as well as self-interest and to reconstruct the problematic norms that are causing environmental harm.

Conclusion

Just as Viscount Bruce saw that the “old mentality” was persisting far beyond its lifetime in 1948, the Commonwealth must realize that this has happened again (Bruce, 1948). The machinery of multilateral institutions is severely outdated and must be adapted to the challenges it faces, with one the most prominent being climate change.

Multilateralism has entered a period of crisis and is failing in its capacities to illicit change due to poor normative foundations (Eggel & Galvin, 2020). The Commonwealth is

arguably trapped in Bruce's third scenario where real cooperation seems nearly impossible. It has faced criticism for being inconsistent, ineffective, outdated, and unable to respond to the human rights issues of the modern day. These shortcomings come at a time when it is more critical than ever that the international community take collaborative action (Eggel & Galvin, 2020). This new multilateralism must be driven by more than just states, it will need to involve many different actors to create new regulations, partnerships, and norms (Eggel & Galvin, 2020). This change can be accomplished by using a constructivist analysis to understand how and why the Commonwealth is currently ill-equipped to address climate change. Then, by taking a transformational approach and generating systems change, this multilateral organization can be one of the first to pioneer a new form of multilateralism for the benefit of all nations involved.

The theory-practice gap, which is the disparity between what is learned or understood, and what realistically occurs, seems to be a recurring theme in the rhetoric of 1948, 2020, and those of critics alike. While the idealist premise of collaboration behind the Commonwealth is admirable and has resulted in achievements, this gap must be addressed to improve competence of the organization. The next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is set to occur in Rwanda this year with the theme "Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022). This meeting is already somewhat momentous and transformative given that it is the first CHOGM to be held at a member nation that did not have historical ties with the United Kingdom. The Commonwealth has shifted from the British Commonwealth of Nations in which other nations were referred to as "Dominions" to a multilateral institution that attempts to ascribe all nations with equal value. Just as this shift was accomplished, perhaps these meetings should no longer be focused on Heads of Government but rather states, NGOs, corporations, regional blocs, and a variety of actors coming together to

innovate. With a theme in the next meeting of “transforming”, I cannot think of a more optimal time for the Commonwealth to utilize constructivism and a transformative approach to reform norms and governance within their institution. The climate crisis demands new machinery to generate solutions. New machinery that can place the Commonwealth in Bruce’s first scenario of genuine and meaningful international cooperation for the betterment of the global community and the 54 member nations involved.

Resources

- Alvarez, J. (2000). Multilateralism and its discontents. *European Journal of International Law*, 11(2), 393-411. Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/ejil/article/11/2/393/636907?login=true>
- Beresford, P., & Hunt, T. (2020, March 9). “Commonwealth in 2020.” *UK Parliament, Volume 673*. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-03-09/debates/50E1692C-2BBD-4C21-A17E-77120A775EF5/CommonwealthIn2020>
- Bruce, S. (1948, February 17). “Commonwealth Relations.” *UK Parliament, Volume 153*. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/1948-02-17/debates/9781be99-a5cc-4a36-bbb4-c922da3b934b/CommonwealthRelations>
- Burgess, H. & Burgess, G. (1997). *Transformative Approaches to Conflict*. Retrieved from <https://dal.brightspace.com/d21/le/content/132295/viewContent/1932253/View>
- Commonwealth Secretariat. (2022). *Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)*. Retrieved from <https://thecommonwealth.org/chogm>
- Darling, K. (2012). *A Weight for Water: An Ecological Feminist Critique of Emerging Norms and Trends in Global Water Governance*. Retrieved from https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1687279/Darling.pdf
- Eggel, D., & Galvin, M. (2020). Multilateralism Is In Crisis – Or Is It?. *Global Challenges*, 7. Retrieved from <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/7/multilaterism-is-in-crisis-or-is-it/>
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2021). *Commonwealth association of states*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Commonwealth-association-of-states>

- Figueres, C. (2012). *Climate Change: Why We Need a Multilateral Solution*. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/news/lecture-climate-change-why-we-need-a-multilateral-solution>
- Grady, P. (2020, March 9). "Commonwealth in 2020." *UK Parliament, Volume 673*. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-03-09/debates/50E1692C-2BBD-4C21-A17E-77120A775EF5/CommonwealthIn2020>
- Langenhove, L.V. (2011). *Multilateralism 2.0: The transformation of international relations*. Retrieved from <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/multilateralism-2-0-the-transformation-of-international-relations.html>
- Matejova, M. (2021). *From realist to pragmatic solutions to climate change: Reading Anatol Lieven's Climate Change and the Nation State*. Retrieved from <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/doi/full/10.1177/2336825X211009097>
- McBride, J. (2020). *The Commonwealth of Nations: Brexit and the Future of "Global Britain"*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/background/global-britain-and-commonwealth-nations>
- McDougall, D. (2018). The Commonwealth in contemporary international relations. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 56(4), 547–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2018.1514695>
- Menzies, R. G. (1970). Stanley Melbourne Bruce. Viscount Bruce of Melbourne. 1883-1967. *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society*, 16, 57–62. Retrieved from https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/stable/769585?sid=primo&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents
- Nordås, R., & Gleditsch, N. P. (2007). Climate change and conflict. *Political Geography*, 26(6), 627–638. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2007.06.003>

- Radi, H. (2006). *Bruce, Stanley Melbourne 1883-1967*. Retrieved from <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bruce-stanley-melbourne-5400>
- Russell-Moyle, L. (2020, March 9). "Commonwealth in 2020." *UK Parliament, Volume 673*. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-03-09/debates/50E1692C-2BBD-4C21-A17E-77120A775EF5/CommonwealthIn2020>
- Slaughter, A. (2011). *International Relations, Principle Theories*. Retrieved from <https://dal.brightspace.com/d21/le/content/111782/viewContent/1570261/View>
- Stirling, A. (1974). *Lord Bruce: The London Years*. Melbourne: Hawthorn Press.
- Thakur, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (2006). Enhancing Global Governance Through Regional Integration. *Global Governance*, 12(3), 233–240. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/27800615?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents
- Tsafos, N. (2021). *How Climate Ambition Can Save Multilateralism*. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-climate-ambition-can-save-multilateralism>
- United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). (2017). *The way forward: Pathways toward transformative change*. Retrieved from <https://www.unrisd.org/flagship2016-chapter8>