

2022 Commonwealth Day Lecture

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A Challenge for the Commonwealth?

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I am privileged to have been invited to give this lecture. I am grateful to the Council for Education in the Commonwealth who have invited me.

You will be pleased to know that I do not intend to lecture for the full 1h 30mins! I recall the MP who spoke for so long in the Commons that he was rebuked for having "exhausted time and encroached upon eternity"

In any event, I have always believed that what one cannot say in 30-40 minutes, however important and worthy, one will not say in an hour and a half .

This Lecture is in memory of Gladwyn Jebb who became Lord Gladwyn.

I never knew Gladwyn Jebb but I knew of him. And what I knew I admired. He was one of our finest diplomats; the first (acting) Secretary General of the infant UN, presiding over its first meeting in 1945 just over the road at the Methodist Central Hall. It was once remarked that diplomats were people "who could be disarming especially when their country wasn't".

He was tough as well as disarming. When rebuked by the veteran Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, Gladwyn, icily replied "I tremble"

Gladwyn was what I would call, a realistic visionary when it came to international affairs and the risk of further wars. In his later years he said:

"Among men struggle is inevitable -if only because life is a struggle...So in order that mankind should not destroy itself totally in its struggles, it is essential to have some place...in which reason, or law, can be brought to bear on conflicts, either for preventing them in accordance with certain generally accepted rules. We must not despair if these rules are often violated or more frequently ignored, or even if the Super-Powers sometimes fail to make use of the machinery altogether. The great thing is that it should be there. And when the abyss really yawns before them, I believe that this time...it is to the United Nations that the nations will turn."

These remarks could, hardly, be more relevant in the light of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Gladwyn went on to be the British Ambassador to the UN and then, Ambassador to Paris, two of the most important diplomatic posts representing the Queen and the Government.

He then moved from being a diplomat to having a political career. I went the other way from being a politician to serving in the Foreign Office!

Gladwyn was Deputy Leader of the Liberals in the House of Lords. When asked why he had joined the Liberal Party he replied that the Liberals were a party without a general and he was a general without a party!

He was a rather conservative Liberal while I am happy to be thought of as a liberal Conservative!

My lecture today is sponsored by the Council for Education in the Commonwealth.

In Britain we, sometimes, take the Commonwealth for granted. It is, in fact, unique. There are universal organisations like the UN. There are regional organisations like the EU, ASEAN, or the African Union.

But the Commonwealth, while not being universal, transcends continents, ethnicity, and forms of government. What it shares is a historic link with the United Kingdom, the use of the English language and many shared social, ethical, and political values including the rule of law, human rights and democratic accountable government.

It represents around a quarter of the world's states. It is entirely voluntary. There is nothing like it elsewhere in the world today.

In my lecture today I want to concentrate on two separate themes. The first will be to compare, on the one hand, how the British Empire evolved into the Commonwealth, a free association of 54 states; with how the Russian Government over the last 30 years, but especially under Vladimir Putin, has determined its relationship with the 14 new states which, together with Russia, once formed the Soviet Union, the name adopted for the Russian Empire after 1917.

Secondly, I want to share with you my deep concern as regards a major new challenge facing the Commonwealth, and the wider world, with particular reference to education, human rights and personal liberty, where my comments will focus on China.

The way in which the Commonwealth evolved is particularly relevant, today, when Ukrainians are fighting for the very survival of their nation. Russia, we should remind Mr Putin, is not the only country whose empire disappeared in the 20th century. The British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and other empires also disappeared between 1945 and 1975 never to return.

The Russian Empire, called then the Soviet Union, was the last to go. The disappearance of the Russian Empire had nothing to do with NATO, the West, or the United States as President Putin likes to imply.

Rather it was one of three extraordinary events that happened, almost simultaneously, between 1989 and 1991, historic years in European and world history.

Firstly, there was the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War which had persisted for 44 years between the Soviet Union and the Free World. That it came to an end, peacefully and without, almost, a shot being fired, was, partly, due to the strength and resilience of the Western alliance over many years. But it was also due to a remarkable man, Mikhail Gorbachev, who had become leader of the Soviet Union and was determined

to work with President Ronald Reagan to end the Arms race, achieve genuine multilateral nuclear disarmament and transform the Soviet Union into a more open and much freer society.

I was privileged to be present at the historic occasion in 1985 when Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher first met at Chequers. They had a series of deep and serious conversations. At the end Mrs Thatcher declared to the world that she believed that Mr Gorbachev was a man with whom the West could do business. She so persuaded President Reagan and the rest is history, leading to the end of the Cold War in 1989.

During the talks between Mrs Thatcher and Mr Gorbachev they agreed on very little. She was the Iron Lady, and he was, at that time, still a Communist and the likely next leader of the Soviet Union.

But as a result of their conversations they began to understand each other. Even more important, such were their personalities and character, they began to trust each other. Trust between statesmen does not depend on holding the same views. It is when, for good reason, you begin to feel that your adversary means what he says and will adhere to what he promises. Very sadly, the world as a whole, and his neighbours in particular, have found they cannot trust President Putin which will make the resolution of the current crisis very much more difficult.

The second event of historic significance during the late 1980s was the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and its replacement by market economics and capitalism. Communism collapsed because it could not deliver prosperity to the Soviet people, it was remarked at the time that Communism only worked in heaven where they did not need it and in hell where they had it already.

But it is the third simultaneous event, the implosion and disintegration of the Soviet Union as a single state that has the most relevance to the Ukrainian crisis today. The Soviet Union disappeared in 1991 and was replaced by 15 new states of which Russia and Ukraine were the two largest.

The Soviet Union was, in effect, the Russian Empire of the Czars. Its disintegration was the end of Europe's last empire. It is that which Putin most bitterly regrets and cannot accept. He has said that it was the greatest geopolitical disaster of his lifetime.

That it collapsed was the work of Boris Yeltsin and his closest colleagues who had come to believe that Russia would be more successful and prosperous by itself. The United States was actually ambivalent about the Soviet Union's disappearance. President George Bush was so worried about Ukraine holding on to the Soviet nuclear weapons on its soil that, in a speech in Kiev, at the Ukrainian Parliament he tried to persuade the Ukrainians not to choose independence. They were so angry with him that his speech, thereafter, was known as the "Chicken Kiev" speech!

Putin's open aggression has not, of course, been limited to Ukraine. Because of Russian military invasion Georgia has lost the two provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia which the Kremlin describes as independent states like Donetsk and Luhansk. Part of Moldova, in Transdnistria, has Russian troops which keep it locked in a frozen conflict. Until this year the worst example was the annexation of Crimea regardless of the will of its inhabitants

and in breach of solemn international undertakings by Russia to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Russia, under Putin, had an alternative strategy it could have followed as regards its new independent neighbours. It could have held out the hand of friendship, respected their new status and offered to help them build new institutions and create a new society.

That is, to a great degree what the United Kingdom did as, starting with India and Pakistan, each of its dependencies and colonies became independent states. The result was that the British Empire evolved into the Commonwealth of Nations.

That should have been Putin's policy especially as regards Ukraine and Belarus, fellow Slavs although with different national aspirations. If he had done so many Ukrainians might not have aspired to NATO membership. They would not have been frightened of Russia. Together with the new states of the Caucasus and Central Asia they might have become partners working with Russia for economic and social progress. Some, like Ukraine, might have chosen a close relationship with Western and Central Europe just as India has a close relationship with Russia or Pakistan with China.

It was, one must acknowledge, easier for Britain to come to terms with the end of its empire than it was for Russia. The British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and other Western European empires were overseas in Africa, Asia, the West Indies and elsewhere. Their loss seriously affected British prestige and our status as a global superpower. But they did not make the British feel more vulnerable to potential invasion or aggression by its neighbours.

The Russian empire had been a different kind of empire. It covered a vast land mass, mostly uninhabitable, had a remarkably small coastline and few natural boundaries. It had grown by occupying and trying to absorb its neighbours, both in Europe, in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. Like the Roman Empire it believed that this gave it the greater security that it needed. The difference was well described in the remark that Britain had an empire. Russia was an empire

When the Kremlin no longer controlled these other nations the Russian people were told, by Putin, that their security was threatened. That has been used by Putin to try and justify the invasion of Ukraine.

Britain, in contrast, when it was faced with invasion by Hitler's Germany, respected Ireland's neutrality in the War, despite the Royal Navy being denied access to Ireland's Atlantic ports.

Britain accepted the end of its empire in good grace, treated all its previous colonies and dependencies as friends, and provided them with aid. The consequence has been that we have a Commonwealth of friends; so much so that 54 independent states have chosen to remain associated with the former colonial power and have welcomed the United Kingdom's Queen as the Head of the Commonwealth, and the Prince of Wales, when he becomes King, as the next Head. Despite the many failings of the Empire that transition is something we can be proud of.

I turn now to the second theme of my Lecture this morning. I have been fortunate in my association with the Commonwealth since I was a student at Edinburgh University in the 1960s and took part in the first

COMEX, a Commonwealth overland expedition, from London to New Delhi, of young British students to meet their counterparts in India.

In Government I never forgot that I was Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and that to emphasise our special relationship we had no Commonwealth Ambassadors but High Commissioners, as elsewhere throughout the Commonwealth's 54 member states.

More recently I served as one of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Panel that reported to the CHOGM in Perth Australia in 2010. Last year, at the request of the Vice-Chancellor of London University I chaired an Inquiry into the future of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London.

Joanna Newman, Chief Executive of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, was a very distinguished member of that Committee, as was Stephen Twigg of the CPA.

We have, today, a Commonwealth of values but also a Commonwealth of Learning that recognises that without universal literacy; without primary, further and higher education, this, and generations to come, will have a bleak and unfulfilled future.

But in giving my lecture the title of "A New Challenge for the Commonwealth ?" I wish to draw attention to a new threat that is emerging in our world that could blight future generations of the children of the Commonwealth, and of the world as a whole, from enjoying and benefitting from the education that they receive.

Education is the act of teaching knowledge and receiving knowledge. Its benefits are not in doubt and are not, in principle, politically controversial.

One can think of education in three categories:

- a) Literacy. Teaching people to read, write and work with numbers. All countries strive to achieve this, and the effort does not divide the world politically. It is crucially important in poor, developing countries where literacy is the key to their economic and social development.

In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries my own birthplace of Scotland was in this situation as a very poor country next to a much richer England. The only way to escape from poverty was to become literate and then Scots could aspire to become a teacher, a clergyman, a merchant or, dare I say it, a lawyer.

This was supported by the presbyterian Church of Scotland who wanted ordinary people to be able to read their Bibles which required schools to be established throughout the country to enable poor people to be able to read.

The consequence was dramatic. Scotland, despite its poverty, had 4 universities, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and St Andrews, from the 16th century while England had to make do with only Oxford and Cambridge until the 19th!

- b) Knowledge also consists of those facts and figures that can be used to advance economic performance, industrial growth, public and personal health, environmental standards and much else.

This requires teaching at school and in further and higher education of physics, chemistry, mathematics, computer science and IT, and other technical, scientific facts, figures, and theories.

Most of this teaching is not dominated by a political or ideological agenda. There are disputes and controversies, but they are between experts, academics, practitioners, and scientists. For the most part they do not need nor attract government control or excessive interference.

- c) I come to the Humanities, however. They include history, culture, literature, and art. The narrative now becomes more difficult and controversial and, often, political.

The teaching of these subjects is, inevitably, influenced, to a degree, by national experience and stereotypes, by the personal beliefs and views of teachers and lecturers, and by the authors of the relevant books and textbooks.

Much of that is unavoidable, but it can be, and is, also influenced, to varying degrees by governments, ministers and politicians not just in the UK, nor in the Commonwealth but throughout the world.

However, in this third category there is, today, a deep divide between open, liberal, and democratic countries and those that are not only authoritarian but ideological as well. The latter are, thankfully, few but as they include China they are of major significance to the world as a whole.

Authoritarian governments have always used censorship, propaganda and control of national media to try to present their version of national and international history. We are seeing this in Russia today. They do so, in part, to try and ensure their retention of power. Their concern is not free elections, which they do not hold, but any opposition from their citizens, peaceful or otherwise, that might pose a threat to the dictator or to the government's power.

Such despots and dictators try to wear a fig leaf of legitimacy. Invariably they call themselves democratic; often they are described as Peoples Democracies to distinguish themselves from real ones. They have sham elections even in North Korea though who they think they are fooling baffles me.

Even more seriously they criminalise peaceful opposition such as demonstrations, to try and justify imprisoning their opponents.

When I was Foreign Secretary, I met the Chinese Foreign Minister in Beijing to discuss Two Systems in One Country, for Hong Kong, which would happen in 1997. When I asked him whether the people of Hong Kong would continue to enjoy the Rule of Law after they became part of China, he told me not to worry. China believed in the Rule of Law. In China, he said, "the people must obey the law".

I informed him that when we referred to the Rule of Law it was not just the people who were under the law but the Government, and its Ministers, as well.

That the Chinese Foreign Minister could not understand. The difference has been well expressed. Democracies and free countries have the Rule of Law. Dictatorships have Rule By Law. They criminalise any political opposition to try and justify imprisoning their opponents.

The use of censorship and propaganda has been around for centuries, but we now have a new, global and independent source of information available, to every person, throughout the world. I refer, of course, to the Internet.

Until recently, it appeared that the Internet and social media would serve the cause of liberal values by providing an alternative source of facts not only to that provided by governments or public authorities but also to that which could be read in politically partisan newspapers or magazines.

The Internet allowed us to say (and to believe) that George Orwell and Aldous Huxley had got it wrong with their dystopian novels, 1984 and Brave New World. These books predicted that totalitarian governments would have, through use of advanced technology, the power to control the provision of all information enabling all adults not only to be denied access to the truth but, also, to have their day to day behaviour made subject to the full control of the State.

For most of the last 30 years the power of the Internet, the development of mobile phones, social media and the immediate access every human being could have to all the information stored on the World Wide Web appeared to be an unalloyed benefit which worked against the interests of dictators, despots and other tyrants, whether from the far right or left of the political spectrum.

But this is no longer true in China. In China, the public cannot read about any version of their history not approved by the regime. This is achieved not just by normal censorship of radio, television, newspapers, and magazines as in other dictatorships like Russia.

There is also a new, aptly named, Great Firewall of China which blocks all access through the internet to sensitive subjects.

It has been, sadly, very successful. A very bright Chinese Oxford graduate recently informed me that he was entirely unaware of the Tiananmen Square massacre until he came to UK as a student in his late teens.

Furthermore Apps are now being used to supervise every Chinese citizen and monitor their social and political behaviour. This can lead to their punishment and exclusion from higher education or meaningful employment if they are deemed to have been anti-social or insufficiently patriotic.

Big Brother really is now watching 1-3 billion of the world's population. Brave New World and 1984 are with us today in Xi Jinping's China. Will other despots and dictators be able to resist copying China and destroying what is left of their peoples' personal freedom?

So education and IT is being used, in China and in some other countries, as the supreme political tool. The Commonwealth, representing 54 countries around the

world, must be sensitive to this threat. Education in each country of the Commonwealth must continue to be a means of enhancing personal freedom and the quality of life; and not distorted into becoming a means of enchaining their people.

The policy of the Chinese Government, and of others is, already, having an impact not just on young Chinese and other students but on some of the people who teach them, including here in the UK at British universities.

The Times reported, recently, that many "Academics are self-censoring to avoid causing offence to students from authoritarian states such as China". Two thirds of a survey of 1,500 social science faculty members across a range of British institutions, said they believed that academic freedom in higher education was under threat and more than 40% felt the same about their freedom to select teaching content.

For those researching China, more than a fifth had self-censored. Three fifths of academics who had links with China considered their freedom to select content to be at risk.

These developments raise questions as to the purpose of education.

Is it to serve the State? Or the Party? Or Society? Surely the prime purpose should be to serve the needs of the individual citizen?

Totalitarian governments rarely concern themselves with the rights of the individual. The Commonwealth Charter says otherwise.

We should remember Boris Pasternak's declaration in *Dr Zhivago*. "Man is born to live not to prepare for life"

But do any of these concerns have a specific Commonwealth dimension? It is clear that many leading Commonwealth spokesmen believe they do.

William Horsley of the Commonwealth Journalists Association recently wrote an article entitled "Where is the Political Leadership in the Commonwealth to reverse the assault on Press Freedom?"

I mentioned the Institute of Commonwealth Studies which had been earmarked, at the end of 2020, by London University for closure. The Committee of Inquiry, which I chaired, recommended that that decision be reversed and that the Institute broaden its remit from mainly academic and historical study to include more policy research, and more work with others on current challenges to political and academic freedom.

The University, I am pleased to say, accepted our recommendations last summer and this is already bearing fruit. The Institute, for example, will be involved in a Commonwealth and China Research Initiative.

This is as a result of growing concern of what is described as a grave challenge to freedom of expression as a core human right at a time when there is a growing

Chinese economic and financial stake in many Commonwealth countries. This Chinese penetration has been combined with the increasing use of Chinese surveillance through both software and hardware.

The Institute of Commonwealth Studies has stated that as a core part of its work on challenges to media freedom, it is setting up a research project on the role of China in the Commonwealth, to investigate the extent of Chinese penetration of media landscapes, and to promote public awareness.

At the same time the website of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies is to be expanded to include indices of the Chinese geo-strategic and economic presence in individual Commonwealth countries, including monitoring of media ownership. These initiatives are very much to be welcomed.

The challenges are not limited to China but because of its power and size the Commonwealth, which includes many small, and even, microstates must beware of its embrace.

I conclude these remarks with some more cheerful thoughts. There is a fundamental weakness in Chinese and totalitarian systems.

Despite their power they yearn for legitimacy. They recognise the power of democracy by borrowing the word and often calling themselves Peoples Democracies. In Russia they have sham elections with only supporters of the government permitted to stand as candidates.

There was a recent Chinese White Paper which reached a new level of absurdity and double-speak on this subject. It stated that "China's people's democracy integrates direct democracy with indirect democracy; and peoples' democracy with the will of the state... It is a model of socialist democracy."

A model? I was once told that a model was a small imitation of the real thing! So be it.

Sadly, there is a fundamental challenge between the free world and the dictatorships. As we meet, a massive invasion of free and democratic Ukraine is being undertaken on the orders of President Putin. His fellow dictator, Xi Jinping, has threatened an invasion of a free and democratic Taiwan.

The Commonwealth can be proud that the vast majority of its member states have chosen freedom and democracy and show no desire to abandon them.

But the Commonwealth and each of its individual members must not hesitate to speak out, unequivocally, when great injustice or international aggression takes place. Most of the Commonwealth have been unequivocal in their condemnation of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. But some have not. None voted with Russia but India, Pakistan, and South Africa, and 20 other Commonwealth states, abstained on the vote at the General Assembly which, overwhelmingly, condemned President Putin's action. I understand that each of these countries had its own reasons for not wishing to antagonise President Putin but so have many other countries who have chosen to put principle before expediency. We must hope that India,

Pakistan, and South Africa, in particular, will have second thoughts.

It is the next generation that we must always focus on in the Commonwealth. Freedom and democracy are best entrenched when young people have a rich education which teaches them to think for themselves, to enjoy the benefits of a plural society, to respect diverse opinions and to contribute to the wellbeing of the community of which they are part. In that way they can best serve themselves, their families and the wider world community.

On these vital matters the Commonwealth must lead not follow, and must demonstrate by its own behaviour, nationally and internationally, that a free and democratic world is the best prospect for mankind as a whole. Education will be the key to its success.

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