

The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth

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Krishnan Srinivasan

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I come to talk of Commonwealth affairs.

Shakespeare *Henry VI* Part 2, Act I, Scene 3

My purpose is ... to speak about the little-mentioned or noticed, to consider subjects which are neglected; to be critical, not for the sake of casting stones or scoring points but because universities must test from one generation to the next, ideas which may once have been accepted but are no longer in their full vigour, or which may be derided by fashion but worthy of a kinder fate.

Dilks, *Communications, the Commonwealth and the Future* p. 3

India's decision [to remain associated with Britain by joining the Commonwealth] strengthened the Whiggish view of the Empire's progress and purpose including the belief that British rule had been designed originally to allow dependent peoples to advance towards self-government and to reach fulfilment in the Commonwealth ... the Commonwealth according to [the] counter-interpretation was not intended to end the Empire, but to continue it by other means.

Brown and Louis, *The Twentieth Century* p. xii

The rise and fall of the British Empire has often been chronicled: its aftermath less so. Perhaps the main reason for this relative neglect lies in an almost natural aversion to anticlimax.

Mayall and Payne, *The Fallacies of Hope* p. 1

What is the Commonwealth but the ghost of the British Empire come to haunt the present troubled state of international relations?

Austin, *The Round Table*, vol. 75 (297)
Jan. 1986, p. 16

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List of Abbreviations

ACCT	Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique
AIF	Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie
ANZAM	Australia, New Zealand and Malaya
ANZUS	Australia, New Zealand and the United States
APODOTI	Timorese Popular Democratic Association
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBC	Commonwealth Business Council
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization aka The Baghdad Pact
CFTC	Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation
CPLP	Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa
CPP	Convention People's Party
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
EEC	European Economic and Community
Enosis	Union of Cyprus with Greece sought by Greek Cypriots
EU	European Union
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FLNA	Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
FRETILIN	Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor
G7	Group of Seven major industrial democracies
G8	Group of Eight major industrial democracies (G7 plus Russia)
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MFN	Most Favoured Nation
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIBMAR	No independence before majority African rule
OAS	Organisation Armée Secrète
OCAM	Organization of the African and Malagasy Community
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OEI	Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos

OIF	International Organization de la Francophonie
SEATO	South East Asian Treaty Organization
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UDT	Timor Democratic Union
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
UNITA	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics aka The Soviet Union
WTO	World Trade Organization
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front

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Foreword

The historiography of the Commonwealth (but *not* that of the British Empire) is currently in a curious state of limbo or neglect.

Up until about thirty or forty years ago there was a stream of books and pamphlets about the Commonwealth, some of them (such as the Chatham House Surveys by Hancock, Mansergh and J.D.B. Miller) of real distinction. In the 1950s and 1960s there was much writing about the Commonwealth, which was optimistically teleological, Whiggish or progressivist in its general cast (see e.g. Patrick Gordon-Walker's book *Commonwealth* published in 1962). And within Whitehall there was much behind the scenes discussion, especially in the 1960s, by those mandarins charged with plotting the future for Britain's many remaining colonies and dependencies, several of them mini-polities with small populations.

Within Whitehall, as well, in these years there were some strong-minded empiricists contemptuous of mere rhetoric (heirs in this respect of Edmund Burke, who claimed that 'conduct is the only language that rarely lies'). A somewhat extreme but intentionally private statement of the 'empiricist's' point of view was penned, for internal Whitehall purposes only, in August 1959, by Andrew Snelling, then assistant under-secretary in the Commonwealth Relations Office, in a note sent to a colleague in the Colonial Office.

Snelling remarked that newly independent countries felt a 'psychological necessity' to demonstrate their independence to the world. Canada and South Africa had shown this in the 1920s and 1930s. If the rest of the colonies were now lumped in with these senior Dominions then the older members might believe that this detracted from their status. And then, in a classic sentence of Whitehallelse, Snelling said he did 'not despair of our being able to fudge up something when the time comes ... but I do not believe we should bring down hard and fast rules in advance. This is a situation in which we can best play by ear as we go along ... let us continue with our admirable and efficient *ad-hoc-ery*'.

In the first half of the twentieth century to at least the late 1950s there were few, if any, studies of quality which advocated an end to the Commonwealth. In the early twenty-first century there have been few, if any, serious and well-informed studies of the overall Commonwealth at all. Here, however, is a challenging and lucid book on the Commonwealth,

whose title indicates its main thrust and argument. It is a measure of Krishnan Srinivasan's intellectual integrity that he should in this book have commented so fully and so emphatically on what he regards as the persisting shortcomings of the contemporary Commonwealth.

As a former senior member of the Commonwealth Secretariat himself, after a distinguished career in India's diplomatic service, Mr Srinivasan understandably touches only lightly on the role of specific individuals in the substantive conduct of Commonwealth affairs. But he does not shrink from criticism of the performance at times of both the Commonwealth and of CMAG – the Commonwealth's Ministerial Action Group. Some of his comments on these matters need to be pondered by those who should want to see the Commonwealth to be a significant force in the immediate future.

Krishnan Srinivasan well knows that the association he is discussing in this challenging book has not been labelled officially as 'The British Commonwealth' since the 1960s. But it is central to his argument that it was a British-run Commonwealth at least until the mid-1960s, and perhaps later, and his conjectures as to whether this could conceivably become an appropriate designation again are of considerable interest. Furthermore, it is worth bearing in mind the ambiguous point that today in the United States and in a number of other countries it is usual to refer anachronistically to 'The British Commonwealth'. Might this be a reference to the future as well as to the past?

Commentary on the Commonwealth in recent years too often has been characterized by utopian boosterism or, even more, by cynical dismissal. Both of these extremes can be controverted by argument and by practical-minded observation of facts; and Krishnan Srinivasan's book provides its readers with plenty of relevant facts.

Mr Srinivasan's book is thus a welcome, short, but reasonably up to date history of the Commonwealth from 1947 to today. It is not teleological history; but then Whig historians have had more than their say in earlier years. And Krishnan Srinivasan is no myopic empiricist advocating *ad-hoc-ery*. He is a practical man and an experienced diplomat; but he does look beyond the present to speculate intelligently – and invariably controversially – about likely futures. Readers will want to consider carefully whether they agree that today's Commonwealth is 'Nobody's Commonwealth' and to think about the contrasts between the Commonwealth and other post-imperial clubs (see especially Chapter 3 below).

Mr Srinivasan makes extensive, some might say excessive, use of *The Round Table* journal to illustrate and mark many of his points. The writer

of this foreword, as a former editor of *The Round Table*, should declare an interest here. But *The Round Table* has always been a non-governmental affair whose diverse articles are the responsibility and reflect the views of their individual authors. Jealous guardianship of their archives has made access to official papers difficult for would be scrutineers and surveyors of material inside the 30-year rule for access. These 'thirty-year rules' are the most generous terms currently available for consultation on Commonwealth matters – and these are not as generous as the availability of some American materials released or available under the permissive practices of their Freedom of Information Act. And many Commonwealth member-governments, either out of inefficiency or endemic secrecy do not make their archives available to outsiders at all.

This then is a book which provides, in relatively short compass, an overview of a rather complex institution, in language of lucidity and simplicity. The Commonwealth is a perplexing and persistent phenomenon, not only today and in recent history, but perhaps also for some considerable time to come.

In the immediate future, two sources will need to be trawled extensively by historians of the Commonwealth. The first are the British documents on the End of Empire project (conveniently known and referred to as BDEEP) whose overall editor with the help of particular specialist co-editors is Stephen Ashton from the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in the University of London. This splendid project already has produced, by the end of 2004, 13 volumes of documents, though in the preferred terminology of this enterprise a 'volume' may well consist of two, three or four parts which in binding and presentation, are each volumes in their own right.

The second major source needing to be used is the Archive of the Commonwealth Secretariat, which might cast much light on the doings of the Marlborough House mandarins (of which august company, it is worth repeating, Krishnan Srinivasan was a senior member for a number of years) from 1965 onwards – though this will not obviate the need for a critical scrutiny and comment from outsiders.

The Commonwealth is not widely understood in England, or elsewhere, nowadays. Reading and thinking about '*The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth*' should help to lessen rudimentary ignorance and prompt further appraisal.

Peter Lyon
May 2005

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