GLOBALISATION(S) AND THE COMMONWEALTH(S) IN THE NEW CENTURY: TOWARDS ‘NEW MULTILATERALISMS’ RATHER THAN UNILATERALISM?

Timothy M. Shaw

Timothy M. Shaw is the Director, Institute of Commonwealth Studies and Professor of Commonwealth Governance and Development, School of Advanced Study, University of London, London, United Kingdom. He has published a number of monographs on International Affairs of Africa, journal articles on Political Economy of Africa and articles in magazines. He received his BA in Politics and Sociology from the University of Sussex, MA in International Relations from University of East Africa, MA and PhD in Politics from Princeton University. He is also an Occasional consultant for CIDA, DFAIT, IDRC, UN, UNDP, UNECA, UNESCO, UNU etc.

The Commonwealth is a unique grouping, embracing developed, developing and least developed countries across all regions of the globe, and including many of the world’s smallest countries. It is a valuable forum for addressing issues such as tax, competition, money laundering, and corruption, as well as broader political issues such as good government. We will work to sharpen the focus in the Commonwealth’s activities on its areas of comparative advantage. (DFID 2000: chapter 8, para 350)

‘New multilateralism’ (Keating 2002: 5-6) has emerged in the post-bipolar era as a symbol of novel, flexible forms of international cooperation which is not only state-centric, long-term, comprehensive, universal and/or top-down but may also be non-state, short- or medium-term, specific, sub-universal and bottom-up (Cox 1997). Good examples of such redefined multilateralism are ‘coalitions of the willing’, humanitarian or other forms of ‘intervention’, Montreal and Kyoto Accords, Ottawa and Kimberley Processes, This article suggests that, at its best, inter and non-state Commonwealths may come to epitomize such new multilateralism, but when either/both
fail to identify or respond to emerging issues or crises, then they symbolise its deficiencies or limitations. Certainly, in a world of two hundred states, with one strategic hegemon, the imperative of creative multilateralism is undeniable, especially post-9-11/ Afghanistan/Iraq: can the Commonwealths rise to this challenge in the new and unstable new millennium?

After its first half-century, the Commonwealth or Commonwealths - official and unofficial, cultural and social as well as economic, political and strategic - are at something of a crossroads, facing an unexpectedly complicated and conflictual world, certainly not a ‘new world order’ yet hardly a simple ‘clash of cultures’ or a ‘coming anarchy’ either. My thesis is that, given the impetus of decolonisation, the Commonwealth ‘family’ - both official and non-official - was ahead of other inter- or trans-national organisations in the middle of the Cold War in the 1970s in terms of ideas, links, networks etc. Yet, despite the successes of the anti-apartheid struggles, the grouping was in decline by the mid-1990s despite the end of bipolarity. Can it recoup its status as pioneer among global agencies by, say, 2010 in a distinctive post-Cold War yet hardly -conflict context? The inter-state Secretariat asserts that:

...the modern Commonwealth is a family with members in every continent and their association is as much a Commonwealth of peoples as of nations; it is a network not only of governments but also of individuals, non-governmental organisations and civil society groups. (Commonwealth Secretariat 2001b: 1)

But how ‘joined-up’ is it in reality (Shah 2002)? Is the whole really bigger than the sum of the parts? And how ‘competitive’ is it with other international agencies/networks in the new century, such as ASEAN, EU and NAFTA, even the enlarged NATO? In short, might it yet catch the wave of any new multilateralism or is it in danger of being submerged by the revival of US strategic unilateralism and/or by more focused and flexible forms of multilateralism such as heterogeneous ‘coalitions of the willing’ around Montreal, Ottawa and Kimberley Processes?

i) COMMONWEALTHS AT TURN OF THE MILLENIUM

As Ian Taylor recently indicated, official and unofficial Commonwealths together constitute a very under-appreciated and -analysed (as well as -funded?!) feature of contemporary world politics, especially in terms of their contribution to any new multilateralism:
Past literature on the Commonwealth has been overwhelmingly descriptive, historical and lacking in theoretical substance. It has also, perhaps like the Commonwealth itself, sought to avoid controversy and has been largely devoid of any strong critical reflection of the organisation. (Taylor 2000: 51)

In response, I seek to advance the comparative study of inter- and trans-national organisations/relations, treated as new multilateralism, by placing the Commonwealth nexus or family in context at the start of the new millennium (Randall 2001). To develop my thesis, then: it is that the inter- and non-state Commonwealth is uniquely placed because of its genesis, composition and character to play a crucial role in advancing human development and security in the twenty-first century by contrast to some other global agencies which lack its rather unique flexibility and adaptability. But, conversely, it may lose such comparative advantage if it fails to appreciate and exploit generic opportunities such as using the current global lingua franca of commerce and diplomacy, English.

Regrettably, yet symptomatically, unlike the United Nations (UN) system in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi etc - now approaching its 60th year - or the international financial institutions in DC, the contributions of the Commonwealth to new multilateralism – to global government/governance and international development - have not been seriously considered by either students of international relations/organisations or policy-makers concerned with multilateralism or global governance. It is not mentioned for instance in the Report of the Commission on Global Governance, Our Global Neighborhood (1995), even though Shridath (Sonny) Ramphal, the second Secretary-General of the Commonwealth (1975-1990), was its co-chair!). The latest collection from UNU WIDER on Governing Globalisation (Nayyar 2002) is likewise silent on the Commonwealth(s) as are a recent EGDI report coedited by Bjorn Hettne and Bertil Oden (2002), a recent monograph on Multilateral Institutions (Boas and McNeill 2003) and a new monograph from Mark Brawley (2003) on The Politics of Globalisation.

The pair of fin de siecle essays by Jean Philippe Therien (1999) and Tom Weiss (2000) provide informed, nuanced and succinct overviews of the origins and varieties of contemporary international or global governance. The former differentiates current UN from World Bank formulations while the latter looks at the concept’s evolution since 1945, the half-century of the Commonwealth: OECD, Ramphal Commission and UNDP as well as IBRD and UN deliberations
and formulations. All such connections or contracts have since been ‘updated’ or ‘modernized’ by reference to ‘networks’ and ‘partnerships’, which typically include corporate as well as civil society partners.

I advance my comparative analysis by looking at the Commonwealth(s) in relation to ongoing pro- and anti-globalisation movements and then considering their lessons for/from established disciplines and debates.

ii) THE COMMONWEALTH IN THE NEW CENTURY GIVEN GLOBALISATION and ANTI GLOBALISATION ONTO ‘SMART’ NETWORK 7 THINK TANK FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT/SECURITY?

If the Commonwealth does have a future as a thriving and relevant intergovernmental organisation, it is probably through some combination of the last three ‘reinventions’ listed here (small states, good governance and globalisation) ...Alongside the ‘network of networks’ that the Commonwealth still embodies and its lingering community-like features it would still be possible for the Commonwealth to play a role that was both highly visible and not duplicated by any other intergovernmental organisation. (Armstrong 2001: 46-47)

Given its inherent limitations as well as distinctiveness, the Commonwealth has to be ‘smart’ to define and maintain a niche in a world of competing regional to global arrangements, now including willing coalitions for particular humanitarian or other interventions. This reflects the comparative framework of Cox and Jacobson (1973) in which they emphasise how international organisations evolve in response to external competition as well as internal pressures. As Cox (1999) and others recognise, most new issues and creative coalitions have come from below rather than above, especially in the post-Cold War era: biodiversity, ‘blood diamonds’, diasporas, gender, governance, human rights, indigenous communities, land-mines (Tomlin 1998) (www.icbl.org), ozone (Haas 1989), small arms (GIIS 2004) etc.

Such emerging global issues typically are brought into the Commonwealth arena initially by its unique set of Pan-Commonwealth professional associations, which now number some 70, following ‘a virtual explosion’ in their ranks in the post-independence era (McIntyre 2001: 168). However, with the parallel rise of NGOs in
‘global civil society’ in the last two decades of the twentieth-century, some of these rather traditional and staid associations have been somewhat overtaken and overshadowed by the NGOs, including some large INGOs which are active in the ‘Commonwealth Plus’; i.e. centred in but limited to the Commonwealth’s member-states (e.g. AKF, Oxfam, SCF etc) (Lindenberg and Bryant 2001). The people’s Commonwealth and the Foundation can draw strength from such connections, but the Secretariat remains congenitally cautious, tending to be driven by the lowest common denominator (Shah 2002). Hopefully the recent Expert Group on Democracy and Development (Commonwealth Secretariat 2003) which treated MDGs etc, chaired by Manmohan Singh and including such non-establishment figures as Richard Jolly and Martin Khor, might revive the lapsed tradition of creative analysis and direction from Marlborough House so that the Commonwealth might again punch above its weight.

To date, while the former - Foundation - has advanced its network around non-state governance and has provided the framework for the innovative Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) of some eight professional associations and has nurtured the CPSU, the latter - ComSec - has not been actively engaged in several current issues such as land-mines or small arms. Such ‘silences’ are telling. Similarly, the ‘Mbeki’ High Level Review to outline the medium-term future was hardly creative, as the alternative ‘Vision’ (crafted by and a reflection of a willing coalition of non-state groupings) indicated. Mbeki does not indicate where the Commonwealth might again become more than an advocacy coalition; ie over what issues it could again become an epistemic community (Commonwealth Secretariat 2002: 33-57) so contributing to new multilateralism(s).

Several representative and visible groupings in the unofficial Commonwealth lament the inter-state association’s apparent inability to contribute effectively to the new multilateralism. Certainly, the 2001 report of the CHRI (2001: 24) was not sanguine about receiving much attention or support given its assertion that pervasive poverty in the Commonwealth has now become a human rights issue. It called for the ‘new’ Commonwealth to become a champion of human rights as the means to eliminate poverty through a more effective CMAG and Human Rights Unit along with a new post of Commonwealth High Commissioner for Human Rights. And likewise, the Secretariat’s apparent discomfort with myriad issues around indigenous communities is not reassuring in terms of its adaptability and flexibility. As Alison Duxbury (1997: 386) cautioned well before the end of the twentieth century:
While the Commonwealth has used rights to reaffirm its role as an international organisation, further reform is needed if it is to fulfill all the functions traditionally performed by such institutions.

Here I turn to the very new ‘virtual’ Commonwealths to which all the younger generation related before and after the Mancunian games. One of the wonders of contemporary globalisation is the ability to be anywhere (in the Commonwealth, from Malaysia to Mauritius to Malawi) anytime as myriad and increasingly interconnected Commonwealth websites so indicate.

While civil society in the Commonwealth is officially recognised, encouraged and nurtured, in fact there has been considerable caution in the Secretariat, reflective of some member regimes’ ambivalence. Yet in mid-2004 a new pan-Commonwealth Civil Society Advisory Committee was established in the Foundation, with its elected representatives being included in the Foundation’s executive body. Thus, the very limited formal contact between the official and unofficial around CHOGM: the NGO Forum is hardly reflective of the diversity and energy of communities or agencies, notwithstanding the innovation of a Commonwealth People’s Centre/Festival (Commonwealth Foundation 2001c), essentially a market-place for non-official activity. Such arrangements are imperative if any distinctive notion of ‘Commonwealth governance’, as opposed to less organic or authentic IBRD or UN/UNDP versions (Therien 1999, Weiss 2000), is to be designed and developed.

However, the CHRI (2001: 24) cautions that ‘open governance’ in the Secretariat and related official organs is elusive and that formal consultation with civil society is insufficient, calling for the Secretary-General to ‘signal his clear and unequivocal support for the unofficial Commonwealth and the importance of these somewhat bottom-up networks for the longevity of the Commonwealth itself.’ The CPSU’s current project on ‘Joining up the Commonwealth’ (www.cpsu.org.uk) constitutes a most welcome, empathetic overview of the limits and prospects (Shah 2002). In association with RCS and ComSec consultations and deliberations, hopefully the Commonwealth family can once again maximise rather than minimise its inherent advantages. Indeed, the Secretariat has advertised a series of challenging posts over the last 12 months, reflective of new demands plus new resources.

There is another important, yet largely unrecognised aspect to the Commonwealth’s networking, especially for those members who are immigrant societies and/or multi-racial/-cultural: it facilitates relations among diasporas. As much of the world becomes more
cosmopolitan – not just traditional immigrant countries like Australia and Canada but also Britain and South Africa etc – so Commonwealth connections constitute a framework for communication and understanding: the Harare principles applied domestically as well as externally? Hence the continuing burgeoning of Commonwealth literatures etc: onto the annual Commonwealth writers’ prize.

In short, alternative ‘inclusive’ versus ‘exclusive’ scenarios or ‘futures’ can be envisaged for the Commonwealth family over the next decade or so (McIntyre 2001: 221-229), with implications for advancing or retarding multilateralism. The former would entail a welcome for the diverse range of non-state institutions and relations, such as the Commonwealth Games, Writers’ Prize and Young Commonwealth. By contrast, the latter would constitute a retreat away from engagement with civil society, tentatively pursued in the last decade, back towards a more limited, state-centric focus, even if ‘governance’ remained on the agenda, albeit in diluted form, more compatible with prevailing IBRD and UN/UNDP formulations and de facto US unilateralism and veto. The former would tend to attract more NGO attentions whereas the latter might attract more state applicants, even members.

Hence, as suggested at the start, the Commonwealth is at something of a crossroads at the start of the new millennium (Bourne 2001), intensified by the understandable yet regrettable postponement post-September 11 of the official CHOGM from October 2001 to March 2002 (Commonwealth Secretariat 2002). To be sure the People’s Commonwealth proceeded with vigour in Brisbane (Commonwealth Foundation 2001c), but missed the other, official side to which to relate. And now Amanda Shah (2002) and others are seeking to identify ways to transcend such solitudes. Hopefully, in taking the events on and after September 11 into account the Mbeki report can be further revised to reflect the profound challenge of global governance after two decades of neo-liberalism and related inequalities and alienation: the intensity of some forms of anti-globalisation.

iii) THE COMMONWEALTH IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: ONTO RESTRUCTURING AROUND THE BIENNIAL SUMMIT BETWEEN ABUJA and MALTA?

The half-century of the state and non-state Commonwealth, coinciding with the founding and then programming of the Institute which I am honoured to presently animate, I would argue should have generated some insights of relevance to several fields of analysis and policy
debates, especially in terms of contributions to both old and new multilateralism.

I highlight a trio of these below, but beforehand would also note some ‘silences’ of special relevance to such multilateralism: the Commonwealth does not relate to issues of (national, regional or global) security, except in a very broad sense of enhancing the context for human security (though, as noted below, it has recently advertised for several new officers to inaugurate an enhanced ‘good offices’ facility), or regionalism, although there are some regional dimensions to the Foundation’s youth and professional activities (Lundun and Jones 1997). Further, the Commonwealth has not been an active player in peace-keeping interventions, though its election monitoring augments longer-term confidence-building (Sives 2001) and occasional appointments of special representatives of the Secretary-General can nudge mediations in some of the smaller member-states (Anglin 2000); in late 2002, it advertised posts in a new good offices section in its political affairs division.

Neither has the Commonwealth related to regional economic blocs like the APEC, ASEAN or NAFTA although these impact its members’ development prospects profoundly; but, happily, it is beginning to dialogue with the EU, which post-accession 2004 had a trio of offshore, island Commonwealth members shortly (including the UK!). Unlike some other regional or sub-global groupings in the UN system, the Commonwealth has not used that forum to advance its network or concepts though, post-Mbeki review, its Ambassadors-cum-High Commissioners in NYC are beginning to meet monthly.

Before turning to the trio of discourses where the Commonwealth holds particular relevance, let me note the dramatic impact which new technologies associated with both pro-and anti-globalisation movements (Addison and Rahman 2002) have had for it and other international organisations, state and non-state. The internet, which is dominated by the Commonwealth’s own English language, has transformed the family along with other such inter- or trans-national agencies (McIntyre 2001: 231-234) even if the ‘digital divide’ reinforces the North-South fissure throughout all of them! Hence the expanding role for the ACU as a ‘knowledge network’ of great relevance to the global political economy/culture - the centrepiece of the BOP issue? - from Bangalore to Singapore, Britain to Mauritius, where the English-speaking communities have an advantage (Addison and Rahman 2002, Lundin and Jones 2001): onto the next CHOGM’s motif: networking within the Commonwealths.
The Commonwealth itself now exists ‘virtually’ as well as in reality as indicated in the helpful list of web-sites in an appendix in McIntyre (2001: 231-234), some of which are listed below in the Bibliography. This ‘virtual’ Commonwealth may appeal more to the new generation throughout its 54 members than the old-fashioned CHOGMs of middle-aged men etc. Happily, most major Commonwealth web-sites are hyper-linked to each other so one can ‘surf’ both official and unofficial Commonwealth any day, anytime, anywhere (see Commonwealth Secretariat flyer ‘Click into the Commonwealth’ (London, August 2001)).

iv) LESSONS FOR/FROM NEW MULTILATERALISM

I conclude by reflecting on lessons from the Commonwealth in relation to continuing debates about multilateralism(s) at the start of the millennium for a trio of disciplines or debates with which I’ve been associated for some four decades.

First, in regard to established ‘disciplines’ like political science/international relations/foreign policy, including old and new multilateralisms, the Commonwealth nexus is a prime case of endless institutional adaptation as Empire gave way in stages to new forms of governance: not so much planned decolonisation as muddling through. And certainly for small, especially island, states (Sutton 2001), it remains a very attractive forum in which they are not totally overshadowed. Furthermore, as an international organisation, it was, not always wittingly, in the avant garde, of the movement for such inter-state agencies to engage non-state actors, notably civil society. Fortuitously, this trend accelerated in the post-Cold War era, just as the Commonwealth was seeking a post-apartheid raison d’etre (Vale and Black 1994). So it was well-placed to maximize the benefits to it of the historic nexus of professional associations and related NGOs clustered around the Commonwealth Foundation. Nevertheless, as already indicated, the Secretariat still exhibits ambivalence about being too positive towards the unofficial or people’s Commonwealth, not wishing to yield the initiative to it, notwithstanding its invaluable role in discovering and advancing new global issues around the turn of the century.

Moreover, other global institutions have begun to emulate the Commonwealth and develop their own working relations with civil
society, notably the World Bank, which has the resources to co-opt at least programmatic if not advocacy NGOs, and the UN. And both of these have gone further than the Commonwealth (cf Commonwealth Business Forum (www.cbcforum.com) especially its ‘tri-sector’ activities) in developing close working relations with the private sector, again the former in terms of subcontracting, the latter in terms of image and finance: the UN Global Compact (HYPERLINK http://www.unglobalcompact www.unglobalcompact.org) as advanced by another Canadian international relations scholar, John Ruggie et al. The Commonwealth may be in danger of being left behind by the movement for ‘partnerships’ or ‘strategic alliances’ as advanced by the Body Shop (www.thebodyshop.com), Copenhagen Centre (www.copenhagencentre.dk), New Academy for Business etc. Yet CHOGM has carved out its own niche/claim. And the Foundation has a new, active Civil Society Advisory Committee, which has representatives on its executive committee for the first time.

Second, in relation to development studies, now along with global (globalisation?) studies (www.acu.ac.uk and www.dsa.ac.uk), the Commonwealth has been quite adaptable in terms of recognising new ideas and institutions, such as governance and CHRI etc. But it did not directly confront the prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxy of the last two decades, neither did it take on board all new multilateralist issues which relate to a subset of members such as landmines or blood diamonds. Rather, the Secretariat has ‘contracted out’ difficult issues like ‘human rights’ and indigenous peoples to the Foundation: one way to get around a member’s de facto veto. The Commonwealth has always been pragmatic and creative in terms of development policies and its recent ‘Manmohan Singh’ ‘Expert Group on Democracy and Development’ (Commonwealth Secretariat 2003) has a golden opportunity to mediate between later-day sceptics like Soros (2002) and Stiglitz (2002) and the resiliently conservative IFIs, as indicated by the Foundation’s current work on civil societies and MDGs. The Commonwealth remains central to the development strategies of small island states whose challenges now include dealing with the WTO and regional free trade zones as well as sea level rise and cruise boats. And it had already begun to deal with the ‘new’ issue of offshore financial centres and money-laundering even ahead of September 11 2001, which put the issue high on the global agenda. In short, the Commonwealth nexus constitutes an interesting and representative seguey into contemporary issues of globalisation (Payne 2002) – raw material for new multilateralism? - facilitated by its use of/association with the primary lingua franca of globalisation, English.
Finally, in relation to governance, a central feature of any new multilateralism, the Commonwealth has the potential to bring states, civil societies and corporations together in productive ways given its unique set of professional associations, Business Council, Commonwealth Games etc (cf absence of reference to either non-or inter-state Commonwealth in Anheier 2001 and 2004/5 and Glasius 2002!): signal contributions to new multilateralism in a transformed global context?

If it can facilitate communication, confidence-building and innovation, then it will have earned its status as a smart international agency at the start of the new millennium. For this to happen, it would have to consult continuously with a range of stakeholders and design new consultative mechanisms so that both non-state as well as state members came to feel a higher level of comfort and ownership than at present. Alas, the Mbeki report was not particularly creative in this regard despite both the IBRD and UN (www.unglobalcompact.org) becoming much more competitive in this area of governance. If the Commonwealth is able to build on its unique advantage and heritage in this regard then rather than generic debates about good and global governance (Therien 1999, Weiss 2000), we might come to define and advocate ‘Commonwealth governance’ Can the several Commonwealths together advance Scholte’s ambitions (2000: 206-314, especially 313) to reform and humanise globalisation, thereby advancing human development/security?

In short, at the start of the twenty-first century, the Commonwealth nexus can be seen as a distinctive case of a transition from old – state-centric, comprehensive, top-down, long-term and universal - to new multilateralisms; ie from the well-established tradition of ‘international organisation’ to the contemporary notion of ‘global governance’...one which might attract the interest of medias as well as new generations from around the world. Hopefully, the deliberations of the official Commonwealth at its CHOGM in Malta in late-2005 will reflect such opportunity and optimism especially though its further consideration and elaboration of the Manmohan Singh Group on Democracy and Development.

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