THE MODERN COMMONWEALTH – A CRITIQUE

Lukpata Victor Ikong (Ph.D)
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
Federal University Wukari, Nigeria
Email: victorlukpata@rocketmail.com, victolu123@gmail.com

Abstract
At its height in the early 20th century the British Empire included about one quarter of the world’s population and land surface. Emerging gradually from its 16th century beginnings in separate commercial ventures, it rapidly expanded into a loose union of varied sovereignties during the European colonizing competition of the 19th century. By mid 20th century most of its territories had gained independence, and the empire had evolved into the Commonwealth of Nations, an association of equal and autonomous states loyal to the British crown and enjoying special trade interest. The focus of this article is on the critique of the modern commonwealth with a view to making relevant recommendation. Historical – descriptive approach was adopted as method of data collection.

Keywords: British Empire, World populations, Loose Union, sovereignties, commonwealth, British Crown.

Introduction
Lord Durham’s report on the affairs of British North America (1839) probably marked the start of the self-government involvement that evolved into the present structure of the Commonwealth of Nations and the disavowal of an imperial mercantile philosophy. The British North American Act (1867) and the forming of an Australian Federation (1901) changed the status of Canada and Australia from colony to virtually autonomous dominion. British overseas territories convened the 1926 imperial conference that drafted the Statute of West Minister (1931) formally initiating the Commonwealth of Nations. This charter guaranteed all member nations equal status with Great Britain.

However the modern commonwealth can be traced to April 1949 when it was invented to replace the original “British” commonwealth of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. It has now grown to cover 54 countries and its members reflect every region, religion, creed and race on the global scale. There are also a number of countries still knocking on the commonwealths’ door. Mozambique, a Portuguese colony for centuries, recently joined and Rwanda, Yeoman, Palestine, Cambodia all also want to fly the commonwealth flag. The focus of this paper is on the critique of the modern commonwealth.

The structure of modern commonwealth

The commonwealth of Nations consist of three main organs:

The British Crown: which is a symbol of commonwealth unity.

Commonwealth Premiers Conference: which meets annually to hold friendly consultations.
Inter-commonwealth Relations office: The secretary of state for commonwealth Relations, who is a member of the U.K. cabinet, looks after this office. This office work, as the secretariat of the organization and its main duty is to carry out and implement the decisions taken at the annual conference of the premiers.

In addition, there are four subsidiary organs of the Commonwealth of Nations as indicated below:

The parliamentary Association of the Commonwealth of Nations: which consists of delegates sent by different member countries.

The commonwealth Economic Bureau: These help the member nations in the field of agriculture and provide them technical assistance.

The economic Advisory Council: which provides up-to-date technical knowledge of the economic affairs to the members; and

Colombo Plan: which was taken up in 1950 with the co-operation of Australia, Canada, Ceylon, India, New Zealand, and Pakistan for the welfare of the people of the Southern and South-Eastern Asian countries (Eluwa, 1988:288).

Challenges Faced by Commonwealth

The organization is bogged down with many problems some of which are indicated hereunder:

There is a growing tendency among the commonwealth members to look elsewhere for support and strength. For example, during the Nigeria civil war of 1967-70, Nigeria relied on U.S.S.R. for the supply of arms to execute the war.

Mutual differences between the members of the commonwealth have further weakened the organization. For example the difference between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and the British support to Pakistan created friction among these members. By way of flash back, the Kashmir question, which led to conflict between India and Pakistan was brought before the security council by the representative of India in January, 1948 on the plea that the situation in Kashmir posed a threat and danger to the international peace and security. India complained that tribesmen were being encouraged and assisted by the Pakistan government to invade Kashmir. Pakistan not only denied the charges of India but also pleaded that the accession of Kashmir to India was illegal. She brought forward a number of counter allegations against India. After hearing the both parties, the Security Council passed a resolution calling upon them to improve the situation. United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan was formed for the investigation of the situation on the spot. Likewise, Malaysia’s non-support to Pakistan during the indo-pak struggle of 1965 led to Pakistan snapping ties with Malaysia, in the indo-pak war of 1971 which led to the creation of independent Bangla Desh. When a large number of commonwealth countries accorded recognition to Bangla Desh, Pakistan withdrew from the commonwealth as a protest. Similarly in 1961, the Afro-Asian members of commonwealth forced South Africa to give up her membership because of her policy of apartheid. The unilateral declaration of independence by the illegal Ian smith government of Rhodesia in November, 1965 gave rise to bitterness between Britain and Rhodesia, and ultimately led to Rhodesia’s withdrawal from commonwealth. Of late Britain has become a member of the European Common Market (January 1, 1973). This has naturally meant some loosening of all bounds like Commonwealth preferences. This caused particular concern to countries like India and New Zealand for whom Britain has been a major export market. By virtue of membership of European Economic Commission (E.E.C) Britain will have to conform to the trade policies jointly devised by the members of the enlarged common market. All this proves the assertion of professor palmer and Perkins right:

“In spite of the continued collaboration, however, it is not well with the commonwealth. Its bounds have definitely weakened and future is uncertain” (Pamer 2007:696)
Another problem facing the organization is that the commonwealth has no charter like that of the United Nations Organization (UNO) and organization of Africa unity (Africa Union). Therefore there are no standard rules to regulate the governing or operations of the organizations. Member state no longer grants free movement to immigrant from other member countries. This situation has negative impact on bilateral relationship of member state.

Many members belong to other international organizations and these create divided loyalty. For example, the preferential tariffs agreed upon by member states of commonwealth no longer obtain with the formation of different economic blocs in the international system. Britain herself is presently more committed to the European Economic Community (EEC) than the commonwealth.

The commonwealth had no power and machinery to compel member states to comply with its decisions and resolutions. This of course is a serious problem that tares the organization on its face. Member states formulate different Foreign policies as dictated by their-national interest and sometimes in opposition to the common position of the commonwealth.(Eluwa,1988:290)

Criticism about the commonwealth

The aforementioned flaw automatically created the opportunity for criticism as follows: Critics alleged that the commonwealth is a colonial relic, a Neo-imperial conspiracy and nothing but a collection of every important state brought together by accident of having been colonized by Britain. Others claim that it is a toothless bulldog and a mere taking shop which has helped Britain to slowly come to terms with its loss empire.

Taking the above criticism into consideration it becomes necessary to ask the pertinent question, is the commonwealth a pointless Neo-colonial taking shop that achieve nothing in the world today? The BBC online network creates a channel for us to read more of what the critics are saying as documented hereunder: What is common about the commonwealth countries is the fact that imperial Britain rope the blind and they are apparently still blind to see that the commonwealth exist today only because it serves the interests of the British government (John Oluwalogbon, Nigeria).

It is no secret that the British Commonwealth is worthless even to Britain. Nor is it a secret that Britain will always choose its NATO allies over its commonwealth nations. When will the so called republics in the commonwealth finally start living up to their billing as Republics and stop chasing that withered old hag, Britain (Emaka J. Amnaze, Esq, Nigeria). The organization has continued to stay idle even as some countries are going backwards in terms of democratization and the respect for basic human rights. The organizations seem to have not defined it roles in the affairs of its member countries. In some countries we are reaching a stage where we are afraid to criticize even the obvious corrupt and selfish tendencies of the people in government. There is so much tyranny in these countries to the extent that we shall start denying ourselves its citizenship because of the much irreversible action going on. It’s even much better now to leave in another country than in your own country. Very shameful indeed (Kennedy Chama, Zambia).

The commonwealth consist predominantly of developing countries and underdeveloped countries. What other forum is there where they can be represented with an element of respect-the UN? I’m afraid the UN is becoming more and more concentrated on US European issues, and appears to have been altered into powerful political engine-but we all know where these machines head (Sipho South Africa).

The commonwealth by its literal definition is an insult to Africa. Africa has been ripped off for so many centuries that not only should Queen Elizabeth apologies for her inhumane treatment of Africa and Africans to the damage the British Empire cause Africa. It was Queen Elizabeth and the British government that refuse the imposition of economic sanction on South Africa during apartheid. Africa fought in the first and
second world wars, wars African had nothing to do with, those war veterans have never been justly compensated. If I have it my way all Africa countries will cut off tires with the commonwealth until African is given her dues. If the British government would apologies to the Irish people for incident that happened 400 hundreds years ago why not apologies for the brutalities, the savagery demonstrated against Africa. We can’t just let things go by as if they never took place. I think the British people have a good heart and are sure they will agree with me on these points. It is coming to the 21st century, please have it in your conscience and beg for our forgiveness, Africa is always forgiving (Max, Gambia).

Although I am a fervent Australian Republican I still see a place for the commonwealth in Australia’s future. This unique group of like-cultured nations, built upon history is an influential and well-respected society throughout the world. Whilst it may be suggested that the commonwealth is simply a symbol of bygone English pride, I believe it is a mature society, which set a good example for other international organizations.

(Matthew Burke, an Australian in the Netherlands)

Achievement of the modern commonwealth

The organization has recorded a high degree of achievement since its inception in spite of the distractions caused by its critics. The following are some of the achievement:

The organization has successfully organized a forum tagged “Creating Commonwealth Youth Enterprise Development Forum” from 9-13 November 2003. Over 270 delegates from 45 countries attended the forum and Ministers from Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia, New Zealand, Solomon island, Samoa, Kiribati, Uganda, south Africa, Namibia and united republic of Tanzania were in attendant. The created commonwealth forum looked at the steps the members of Commonwealth need to put into place to bring about change in their countries and in their communities to promote greater youth enterprise development. The forum acknowledges the contribution young people are already making and highlighted opportunities for them to continue to contribute. General themes emerging from the created Commonwealth forum include:

Recognizing that young entrepreneurs flourish, we need to get right. Youth enterprise development initiatives need the support of all the players. The need to take account of peoples differing needs, and to respect diversity of culture, experience, background and skills and Affirming the importance of sustainable and responsible enterprise development. A range of ideas and solutions were proposed by delegates, some of which are country based and others which are regionally focused, including: Enhancement collaboration among nations, both at regional and the whole of Commonwealth. The Australian government has made a Commitment to keep the creating Commonwealth website going. Encouraging greater access to business and employment opportunities, mentoring and support. For example, Bangladesh seek to increase youth employment by 3000 by the year 2006; Fiji will start by improving market opportunity for their two youth delegates: New Zealand is interested in establishing a young entrepreneur network to provide support and information.

A greater focus on enterprise education and training through local school and vocational systems including mainstreaming enter premiership in education through African religion and enhancing access to enterprise education in rural and regional Australia. The Caribbean religion had suggested a review of their educational system design to ensure the inclusion of entrepreneurial studies; and promoting the value of youth Enterprise development. For example, India plans to set up demonstration plants to showcase youth Enterprises; the African religion is seeking to establish youth enterprise awards, and the Caribbean has identified the need to develop a common vision for their region. The forum was the first enterprise development forum under the youth for the future initiative. Many countries/ religions are now progressing initiatives and strategies to further enhance Enterprise development in their countries/communities (Srivastva, 1984:60).

The second point of achievement is that the organization has successfully maintained socio-cultural and sporting links among member states. For example, in 1986 the Commonwealth games at Edinburgh. Although Nigeria boycotted the games in protest against South Africa national, Zola Bud and Annette
Cowley participated in the sports meeting. The Nigerian objection was supported by several other commonwealths' countries, but the British sought to defend the inclusion of two south African-born athletes arguing that they were bonfire-residents of United Kingdom. Nigerian action was on the ground that it would strengthen the country case for the downgrading of francophone African ties with France in favour of greater African unity and cooperation. Akinyemi, then the minister for external affairs felt that such a step would give credence to Nigerians claim to a leadership role in Africa. Before the appointment of Akinyemi, Nigeria had taken decisions to boycott two major international sports meeting -the Montreal Olympics in 1976 and the Edmonton Commonwealth games in 1978. These decisions were taken in order to press home the depth of feeling in Nigeria against continuing western sporting links with the apartheid state in defiance of African and world opinion. And it was on this ground that the Babangida Administration sought to explain the decision to boycott the Edinburgh-games. However, in spite of the boycott by Nigeria, the games were successfully organized to the credit Commonwealth organization (Olusanya,1990:76).

Channels for information exchange among member nations have been successfully created exemplified by the created Commonwealth website; The Australian government has made a commitment to keep the created commonwealth website going.

In keeping to the objective of promoting educational assistance in form of scholarship, technical knowledge and facilities for development Commonwealth scholarship is awarded on a yearly-basis for both undergraduate and graduate programmers. Beneficiaries are to undertake their studies within the Commonwealth countries of their choice (Sravastya, 1984:50). The achievements of commonwealth organization are so numerous that they cannot all be pigeon -holed or narrowed down into writing in a paper of this nature in view of its limitation in scope and space.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the problems of the modern commonwealth are the tendency among the member states to look elsewhere for support and strength, mutual differences between the members of the Commonwealth, British membership of EEC, the inability of Commonwealth organization to have a charter, lack of free mobility to immigrant from other member countries , attitude of some members who do not recognize the British crown as the head of the organization, membership of member states in other international organizations, lack of machinery for implementation of the organizations resolutions, and the fact that members have different foreign policies in accordance with their nations national interest. The above have given room for critics to see the body as a symbolism of neocolonialism among other things.

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