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My Commonwealth

'Its real strength is that the US is not in it'

Romesh Gunasekera
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'Commonwealth' is not a word I ever used, growing up in Colombo. There, in the late 1950s, it would have meant little more than New Zealand lamb and Anchor butter at the cold stores. Or perhaps a cricket almanac: a set of fixtures around the world with a common set of complicated rules understood only by the select few. Even "empire", out of which the Commonwealth was invented, was not in my ordinary vocabulary. Rock'n'roll, more likely. Or if it had to be international politics, Bandung had more meaning.

The Bandung conference in 1955 brought 29 Asian and African states together to denounce colonialism and highlight the politics of identity. It led to the Non-Aligned Movement (1961) in which the third world, as it proudly called itself then, sought strength in solidarity against the power blocs of the world. Despite the flaws of its leaders and the schisms and disillusionment that followed, the war cries from those gatherings drowned out the polite conversations of a Commonwealth before its Queen.

Ceylon, as it was then, had been a model colony and gained independence in 1948 with relative ease in an arrangement which many radicals saw as a form of new dependence on imperial markets, foreign aid and imposed institutions. Quite the opposite of Gonzalo's utopia, which my father liked to quote from *The Tempest* ("I the commonwealth I would by contraries/Execute all things..."). Republic status and a new constitution, packed with explosives, wasn't grasped until 1972. Even then, Sri Lanka elected to remain within the Commonwealth. I did hear arguments about that. "How can it be an association of the free and the equal, if a monarch is the head?" "The monarch is not the head, only the symbol of the head."

In 1948, Nehru had insisted on this point for India. The British side had to agree. They didn't want to lose the jewel in the crown and be stuck only with sheep farms. That was the Commonwealth's first transformation. No more a club of old colonials, puffing wanton dreams; it had become a forum for the new diplomacy.

But still it offered nothing for me.

My first inkling of what the Commonwealth might really mean came only when I escaped the oddly British-tinged Asia I had known and went to live in the Philippines. There, the modern imperial power was visibly America, not Britain, the metropolitan magnet California, not England, and colonial Europe was a shipwrecked dream of Spain. In this new world, cars were driven on the other side of the road, tea drunk with calamansi juice, not milk, and cricket did not even exist. The sun I could see set very differently, viewed from the sidewalks of Roxas Boulevard.

The Commonwealth was not the English language; that had plainly moved well beyond exclusive ownership by any single entity long ago. Manila proved it. Perhaps then, I thought, the Commonwealth might be a habit. Australians had it, Indians had it, visitors from Singapore, Hong Kong and Kenya also had it. Not a big deal. But, as people said,

kind of quaint. A bit of shared history.

To come to England, in the 1970s, was to return to this strange other world of half-known history. I found the imperial architecture curiously familiar: the post office, the town hall, the botanic gardens. Very different from the remains of an American presence which tended towards military bases, black-market Marlboros, hamburgers and comfort stations. But the only people in Britain who noticed it were those who had strayed abroad. And the Queen on Christmas TV.

In London, I discovered a peculiar building by Holland Park where the globe was shrunk to fit a British perspective, but which had a library with Sri Lankan books I had never seen before. (A small treasure in the Commonwealth Institute, now about to be closed.) Unfortunately, Margaret Thatcher also discovered the Commonwealth at about the same time. It was not to her liking. Perhaps because of the monarch, always at the centre of the group photo, or those children of the Commonwealth no longer willing to take obsolete lessons. Or perhaps it was really the sanctions urged against South Africa. As a result, the Commonwealth seemed always to speak "with the exception of Britain". So much for a shared view.

It was only after the Thatcher period, in the 90s, that the British government, despite the competing attractions of Eurostar and the Atlantic Alliance, saw there was something useful to be gained, and friends to be made again, in the wider world.

As a keen Commonwealth supporter put it to me the other day: "Not everyone in government wants Britain to be seen always shoulder to bigger shoulder." The strength of the Commonwealth, he claimed, is not in its declarations of good governance, non-discrimination, democracy and human rights. Its real strength is that it is one of the few worldwide associations that the US is not in. "But the problem is that its absence, too, can have a most debilitating effect. You see, we are all so prone to collective hallucinations." Bureaucratized dreams and bush apparitions were all there was left, it seemed.

Then last week I was invited to lunch at the Commonwealth Club where, back in 1985, in its dustier, fustier interior, I had heard Desmond Tutu condemn violence and discuss Mugabe. The place had had the usual 90s makeover of cool green glass, chrome and beech veneers. I was offered tuna sushi, followed by spiced chicken and curried plantain accompanied by Chilean chardonnay. A Commonwealth lunch?

"Oh, yes," my host smiled. "These days the Commonwealth has open doors. They like to celebrate diversity. The heart of it is the People's Commonwealth, you know. Games, art, music, dancing. A South Bank festival right around the world. Even officially, Mozambique is in, and Cameroon, too..."

At the next table I heard the familiar Filipino greeting, "Kumusta".

"And the Philippines?"

"Why not? People power started there, didn't it?"

He was joking, but I couldn't help wondering what would happen if, by some chance, America came knocking on the door.

• Romesh Gunsekera was born in Sri Lanka and lives in London. His latest book is *Heaven's Edge* (Bloomsbury, £16.99).