

Lost opportunities in London

We're often told journalism is about telling detail. Here's one from the [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting \(CHOGM\) in London](#) that ended on Friday. During the closing press conference of a summit pegged as one that would breathe fresh life, energy and relevance into the grouping, a journalist from Nigeria rose to ask a question particularly close to the hearts of the Commonwealth's population: would it address free movement within the 2.4 billion people-strong group? It was put to Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland, but was swiftly passed on to the four heads of government heads gathered there — including British Prime Minister Theresa May — all of who shrugged off the question.

The lengthy communiqué from the leaders published at the end of the two-day summit — and off the back of forums on women, business, youth and civil society — was strikingly short on detail and vision when it came to the issue of migration. A brief paragraph touched on their recognition of “safe, regular and responsible migration”, and various protocols related to refugees.

No India-U.K. deal on illegal migrants

The lack of official recognition of the issue came as the dark cloud of the British government's immigration policy hung heavily over the summit, and in particular over its treatment of the so-called Windrush generation. These are men and women who, often as children, had come to Britain between the late 1940s and early 1970s with their families, as part of post-war efforts to address intense labour shortages, but who, thanks to a toughening of Britain's immigration regime, were treated as undocumented migrants. In some cases they have been denied life-saving National Health Service treatment and even deported. Shockingly in the run-up to the summit, a request by heads of various Commonwealth Caribbean states for a meeting to address concerns with the Prime Minister went unheeded until it spilled into a major domestic crisis, when meetings were speedily arranged and apologies given.

However the situation triggered a larger debate on Britain's approach towards Commonwealth citizens, and accusations that a determination to bring down net migration numbers had inculcated a wider hostile atmosphere for migrants. “If you lay down with dogs, you get fleas, and that is what has happened with the far-right rhetoric in this country,” said David Lammy, a black Labour MP whose persistence on the issue finally brought it to the top of the political agenda. “These people are British,” Ms. May declared at CHOGM, but her assurances will have been seen as too little too late to contradict the sentiment that whatever the perspective of Britain (the current Chair of the Commonwealth for the next two years) on “openness” and “sharing” in the Commonwealth was, it did not really involve migration.

Immigration has long been an issue for the Commonwealth as it has for other multinational bodies, but in the wake of the rise of populist forces around the world, and the supposed opportunity the Commonwealth offered as a bulwark against these, the 2018 summit could have presented an opportunity for it (its Western powers in particular) to send a signal that it stood for something different. Sending a message of openness would have indicated a real willingness to revisit and revitalise the organisation. This was all the more so as Commonwealth proponents have sought to make trade a key plank for it to be a bastion against protectionist moves elsewhere. Yet labour mobility, a demand of businesses globally and certainly of India's IT sector, was nowhere to be seen in the reams of pledges around cleaning up the oceans, cybersecurity, and pledges to raise intra-Commonwealth trade to \$2 trillion by 2030.

The summit had been pegged as a game changer for a number of reasons, depending on who you asked. [For Britain, Brexit](#) had made the quest for non-European Union partnerships

particularly relevant while the attendance by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was widely hailed as an example of the new importance accorded to it by India, one of the largest economies in the Commonwealth. At the same time, the summit came at a time of growing youth-led decolonisation movements globally, not least in Britain where students and sections of civil society have questioned the legacy of the empire and emphasised Britain's need to demonstrate it had truly moved on. Britain had quickly sought to distance itself from "Empire 2.0", the title disparagingly given by civil servants to the aspirations of some Conservative party politicians for a post-Brexit Commonwealth trade bonanza with Africa.

Yet if there had been any doubt about the sense of entitlement with which Britain viewed its position within the Commonwealth, it would have evaporated as Queen Elizabeth II made an extraordinary intervention on the first day of the summit, making clear her "expressed wish" that her son follow her as head of the community. Leaders duly complied, announcing that Prince Charles would indeed succeed his mother. While details of the discussions were kept as vague as possible, aside from the insistence it was eventually unanimous (so much for the transparency that was also touted in the course of the summit), there seemed little excitement and more a sense of grudging acceptance at the prospect of the new leadership.

The Prime Minister of Grenada, Keith Mitchell, described his thoughts when presented with the clear message from Britain that it wished Prince Charles to succeed. He had thought "maybe yes", the Caribbean could do with strong male role models — hardly a ringing endorsement. India too went along with the choice, though on the understanding that British royal leadership would not be institutionalised in the future. However, in Britain, questions about his suitability for the role surfaced, and whether he truly had grasped the changed nature of the world and Commonwealth nations that he would be heading.

One woman wrote of her experience at the summit, when Prince Charles commented that she didn't look like she came from the northern city of Manchester. "That the mooted next leader of an organisation that represents one-third of the people on the planet commented that I, a brown woman, did not look as if I was from a city in the U.K. is shocking," she wrote in *The Guardian*. It was clear that for all the talk of renewal and an equal voice for all, some nations are treated more equal than others.

The faux camaraderie was highlighted by ongoing speculation over India and Pakistan — rumoured handshakes and interactions never took place. Joint statements on the supposed steadfast commitment of countries on issues such as tackling sexual violence towards women fell rather flat when confronted with the reality. If there was genuine debate on countries' ability and willingness to carry through on such stated ambitions, it was not there for the public to see.

Overall there was a sense of being out of touch. The summit was punctuated by rituals and ceremonies out of date with where the world has headed. Pledges of transparency contrasted with the reality on the ground where media participation was largely limited to heavily-stage managed participation in pools, with limited access to proceedings.

This is not to say that the Commonwealth does not have a role at all. London played host to discussions on civil society tackling issues such as modern slavery, the need to clean up the world's oceans, and malaria. Walking around central London there was a certain buzz to seeing the multicultural city even more diverse than it usually is, including with protesters from various diaspora communities who used the opportunity to express their disapprobation with the governments of their home nations.

There were also national interests furthered. India, for one, has very specific ambitions within the Commonwealth, centered around small island states that form the bulk of the members (and to the

cynical, UN votes aplenty to be got on board).

But a multilateral body that can hold its own on the world stage, that gives all nations an equal voice and relevance beyond? The workings witnessed over the past week suggest it is as far away from that as ever.

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