

Commonwealth Round Table on: What after Brexit?

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A report by Debbie Ransome.

See:

<http://www.commonwealthroundtable.co.uk/events/brexit-commonwealth-round-table-looks-whats-next/>

Academics, high commissioners, journalists and members of the Round Table editorial board met on 10th November to discuss the implications of Brexit for the UK and countries around the Commonwealth at the launch of The Round Table Journal special issue on Brexit and the Commonwealth: What Next?

Panel members at the launch discussion were former Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General and former Chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society, Sir Peter Marshall, Sir Ronald Sanders, Ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to the United States, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Africa Today magazine, Kayode Soyinka, Peg Murray-Evans, Research Assistant at the Politics Department, the University of York and Head of Politics and International Relations at Leeds Beckett University, Dr Sophia Price.

Participants looked at the implications of Brexit for UK trade with the Commonwealth, trade and aid implications for Europe, African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, and Britain's post-Brexit global status. They also considered the implications for the UK and the Commonwealth in the wake of the US presidential election results. Although the panel discussion had been organised by the Round Table to look at Brexit and the Commonwealth and to launch the special Round Table Journal edition on this topic, it was inevitable that the election of Donald Trump a few days earlier also became a major topic of discussion.

To follow are some of the main areas covered at the 10 November discussions:

Brexit and the UK's global role

Sir Peter Marshall, started the discussion by questioning whether a referendum was a suitable tool for the 21st Century. He said that the United Kingdom needed to make what he called a "beneficial success" of Brexit but that the country did not seem fit for Brexit at the moment.

Dr Sophia Price said that the European Union would not give the UK a "seven-year runway" for Brexit and that the UK would not get to dictate the terms of Brexit.

Some contributors described a post-Brexit UK as potentially a "diminished Britain".

Sir Peter Marshall described Article 50 as a "shambles" which would be "hopeless as a guide" for any one country to get out of its relationship with the other member states.

Sir Ronald and other contributors did not see a major trade path for the UK and the Commonwealth as a replacement for EU trade.

The idea of a Commonwealth Free Trade agreement was described by Sir Ronald as “enormously difficult” with other Commonwealth countries having to extricate themselves from their existing regional trade deals and Cyprus and Malta having to leave the EU to join such a Commonwealth trade zone.

Brexit and the ACP

Sir Ronald spoke of the “unfulfilled potential” of the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific group of countries) which had been conceived as a network to negotiate with the rest of the world, not just with the EU. He said that the ACP had been scattered during the last round of EU/ ACP negotiations and he described the current EPA as “the most awful treaty for trade”.

Dr Sophia Price said that the UK had co-ordinated the trade and aid packages for the ACP in Europe and that it had done well in putting forward a UK agenda in global, north-south packages over the years. In the current European Development Fund (EDF) between the EU and the ACP, which runs from 2014 to 2020, the UK is the third largest contributor, after Germany and France. She said there was no provision for an EU member state leaving the EDF and no indication over a mechanism for other EU member states to chip in to fill the EDF bank if the UK left this arrangement. Describing the next few years’ Brexit negotiations as “tricky moments globally”, Dr Price said that Brexit would undermine EU relations with the ACP.

The Caribbean in a post-Brexit world

Sir Ronald pointed out that the UK’s contribution to aid and investment programmes had been a key role in the EU with other European countries having little in the way of links with the ACP countries which enjoyed such links.

“The Caribbean has lost a very important champion [in the UK] in the EU,” Sir Ronald told the audience.

On Brexit, Sir Ronald said that Caribbean countries would have no structured trade relationship with the UK and that the UK’s absence from the EU would be of even more importance.

Pointing out that Caribbean and Pacific countries would be “pretty low down” the pecking order as the UK seeks trade deals with the EU after Brexit, with the US and then with larger nations in the Commonwealth, Sir Ronald advised that the Caribbean needed to start its negotiations on its future trade links with the UK. He pointed out that a drop in UK holidaymakers after the post-referendum fall of the pound and a decline in British people seeking second homes in the Caribbean all had to be taken into account. He said that the UK was not a market that the Caribbean could risk being displaced in. “The clock is ticking for Britain, it’s also ticking for the Caribbean,” he said.

Africa in a post-Brexit world

Kayode Soyinka said that the experience of Africa in trade deals, pushed by the UK in the EU had been very similar to the Caribbean. Pointing out that the EPA between the EU and the ACP had still not been signed by Nigeria, he said that the EPA had been an agreement between giants and dwarves.

Stating that there was still a lot of goodwill and influence for the UK in Africa, he said that the UK would still have to work to take advantage of this. He pointed out that it was good timing for the UK to further its agenda in the Commonwealth with the current Commonwealth Secretary-General being British, the Queen as the Head of the Commonwealth and the UK scheduled to host and chair the Commonwealth Group of Nations in 2018.

Peg Murray-Evans said that there had been a continuity of preferential access for ACP countries, transferred from the Commonwealth and into EU trade deals. She said that delays in trade liberalisation in Africa had been on the part of African nations, rather than the EU, with some countries not signing. She said that UK would not be starting Brexit with a “blank sheet” as it had free trade arrangements in place from its EU/ Commonwealth track record but that there was a post-Brexit opportunity for “more ambitious” trade arrangements with Africa.

A Trump presidency and global changes

Dr Price said “We are in the dangerous of moments” with Brexit and the US presidential election focus on isolation and race.

Sir Ronald Sanders, in his current role with the Embassy of Antigua and Barbuda in Washington, had been given a front row seat at the US presidential campaign and said that this informed his viewpoint on a future Trump presidency.

Sir Ronald said that a “whole slew” of US congressmen and small town America would be behind Donald Trump on his promise to tear up global trade deals. “It is going to happen because there is a will to do it”, he said during the wider discussion on a future Trump administration. He also questioned whether the US would seek to pull out from COP (Conference of the Parties to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). Suggestions in the ensuing debate had been that this would take three years if President Trump decided to go down this route; Sir Ronald asked what would keep other countries favourable to COP if they knew that the US was pulling out.