

The Commonwealth-EU misconception

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It has already been an interesting 2013 so far for supporters of the Commonwealth. The new Commonwealth Minister, Hugo Swire, made his [first major written contribution](#) in the Telegraph on the positives of the Commonwealth with the welcome byline:

“This great institution promotes trade and freedom – no wonder there’s a queue to join.”

Then followed a story on Commonwealth trade from the highly respected Sir Ronald Sanders under the title: [Commonwealth or Europe: Why a choice?](#) He advanced the notion that the UK need not make a binary decision on which way she looked in the 21st century. On this substantive point – I agree. However, there is a political game being played here.

The thrust of Sir Ronald’s view is contained within his paragraph:

“It is a shame that these two concepts [the Commonwealth and the EU] have become interlinked however unintentionally. Increased trade with Commonwealth countries is perfectly possible for Britain. It does not have to shed itself of Europe for that to happen.”

On the surface that is true, but from first principles he is saying that we have a choice to make. Presently we don’t. The UK had a choice on increased European trade in 1972, but it does not in 2013. As I have noted [previously](#), the UK is unable to conduct free trade deals independently as she is a part of the EU customs union; therefore, the UK cannot make this supposed ‘choice’ laid out by Sir Ronald. We cannot increase Commonwealth trade freely or fairly without incurring a Brussels-controlled external tariff on many goods that other Commonwealth nations wish to sell to help them either grow or trade out of poverty. Hardly a choice.

To further Sir Ronald’s point he states:

“Curiously, it was this same consideration of expanded trade that, in part, convinced British successive governments in the late 1950s and afterwards that Britain was better

off in a relationship with its European neighbours than it was with the Commonwealth. Seeing very few opportunities for expansion of British trade in the Commonwealth, the then European Economic Community became attractive.”

Again, that is correct; however, as we have seen [reported](#) time and again from Daniel Hannan MEP – the Eurozone’s share of world GDP is dipping considerably, while the Commonwealth has overtaken the EU’s once dominant share. To recycle Sir Ronald’s own summation it now appears the UK, in fact, has *more opportunities for expansion of trade* with Commonwealth partners than EU ones.

What was good in 1972 may not be so in 2013. However, this is again to reintroduce the dualism – the Commonwealth or Europe. Mr. Swire tries to neatly sidestep this point:

“In a world of many bilateral and multilateral regional agreements and associations, we shouldn’t pretend that it [the Commonwealth] is the answer to everything.”

He is right – we do live in a multilateral world and advocates of the Commonwealth are not asking for a return to the old order despite what critics assert. Rather the Commonwealth is in perfect position to access and be the connection in almost all of these associations as Commonwealth nations are also members of ASEAN, CARICOM, NAFTA, and SADC to name a few.

But he misses the point that so many in the UK establishment think that the EU is the main guarantor of free trade and prosperity. To apply Mr. Swire’s own dictum surely the EU certainly isn’t the answer to everything?

Subsequently, as an historian, facts and figures matter: Between 1855 and 1859 the average UK trade to foreign countries was £209m compared with £76m for what was then imperial trade. Fast forward to 1900, the UK’s trade with foreign nations stood at £711m, while the Empire at its zenith was £237m. This led the historian A. P. Thornton to state confidently:

“To lock up any part of the world as an enclave of Empire was to narrow the natural channel of British commerce and to diminish the volume of its returns.”

Therefore, throughout the supposed halcyon days of Empire the UK did, and needed to, trade with every nation on earth by opening up new routes and sea-lanes.

So it is somewhat sad that when I am often given the weak retort by detractors that any increase in the Commonwealth is seen as at best ‘backwards’ or at worst charged with being ‘colonial’, or trying to institute imperial preference.

Is Britain’s former political relationship with her colonies a relevant argument to stop her trading with them today when the EU’s formulation, as a major collection of formal colonial masters, is barely questioned by the powers that be? As the UK’s trade with the EU shrinks surely it is the new European economic empire *locking up* parts of the world to the UK as it *narrowed the natural channel* of British commerce.

The final word should go to Mr. Thornton:

“To think imperially was to think restrictedly, defensively.”

In 2013 the UK should ask this question one more time: Is our current trade pattern too limiting? The Commonwealth is a major and expanding avenue for future business. We have always been more than a mere European Power – time to think and be global once again for that is our rightful place.

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