

5 The Commonwealth as currently constituted is not a particularly effective organisation. Membership carries few economic benefits, unless one believes the rather flimsy<sup>1</sup> research from the Secretariat pointing to a Commonwealth trade advantage. The lack of consistent comparative data on trade costs, and the wide variations in the extent to which Commonwealth countries trade with fellow members, make it very difficult to prove the existence of this ‘advantage’.

It had been suggested that Brexit would deepen economic ties with Commonwealth members in Africa. But a recent trade summit between the UK and African countries produced very little.

This, plus the pandemic, has taken the shine off some earlier predictions of a boom in UK-African trade.

10 Meanwhile, the secretariat itself and its development arm have seen their budgets slashed in recent years. Donors have withdrawn or withheld funding in some very public displays of no-confidence in the leadership of the current secretary general, Patricia Scotland.

Finally, its record in enforcing adherence to shared Commonwealth values, particularly in the field of human rights and democracy, is far from impressive.

15 In 2013, the organisation adopted a charter full of laudable aspirations about justice, democracy and human rights. As such, membership signals to the broader international community that countries share those aspirations.

Yet the Commonwealth took no action when in January 2021, long-serving Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni clung to power after a deeply-flawed<sup>2</sup> electoral process.

20 Other repressive regimes have found the Commonwealth a useful mechanism for ‘reputation laundering’. In 2013, President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka hosted the Commonwealth summit. At the time, his government stood accused of presiding over war crimes in the country’s bloody civil war. In hosting the heads of government meeting, he clearly hoped that the Commonwealth’s benign image would distract attention from the accusations.

25 Paul Kagame of Rwanda seems to be hoping for a similar boost to his reputation when he hosts the heads of government meeting in June. This is despite repeated signs that he is intolerant of opposition.

### **A Commonwealth for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

30 It’s important to remember that despite its Imperial origins, the Commonwealth also has a strong radical tradition. In the 1960s and ’70s it played a leading role in condemning racial discrimination, most notably with its landmark Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles in 1971. In the 1980s and ’90s it campaigned for debt relief for some of the world’s poorest nations. The organisation consists of a variety of networks developed over decades. These include a range of organisations such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Association of  
35 Commonwealth Universities.

40 In recent times, campaigners have used these networks to raise awareness around climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, and other global issues. They have often challenged the policies of their own governments. Online technology offers fresh opportunities to reinvigorate these networks by connecting grassroots activists around the world, and in the process reconnecting the Commonwealth to its radical past. If it is to continue to be relevant to Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that radicalism certainly needs to be rediscovered.