

The Promise of 'Commonwealth Studies'

Every few years, when misperceptions emerge, it becomes necessary to explain what 'Commonwealth studies' are, and why they provide a rich opportunities to scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

On occasion, ill informed people have claimed that 'Commonwealth studies' is a vague label that masks an unimportant, insubstantial field of study. And at times, disappointment with the performance of the Commonwealth Secretariat and affiliated organisations has led some observers to dismiss the worth of 'Commonwealth studies'. This note explains why 'Commonwealth studies' has promise and why, even when the Commonwealth disappoints, it merits scholarly analysis.

Three sub-fields within 'Commonwealth studies' deserve attention here.

I. The Commonwealth as an international institution

Like any international organisation, the Commonwealth – especially the Secretariat -- has had its ups and downs. At times, it has performed poorly. For example, the decision of a previous Secretary General to permit the grossly abusive regime in Sri Lanka to host the biennial Heads of Government Meeting caused acute dismay within the Secretariat and affiliated organisations, and among scholars who analysed them.

But even at such grim moments, it is worth studying because such assessments can enrich our understanding of baleful international trends. The period noted just above indicated how a major international institution can suffer serious damage at the hands of a leader who radically centralises power and silences dissent from subordinates. (The people of the United States, India and several other countries have recently experienced this problem, and even the British may be about to follow suit.)

However, events since the departure of that Secretary General also indicate that the Commonwealth as an institution has the resilience to survive such a dark period and can – despite recent controversies -- at least begin to recover. The dynamics involved merit study.

But not all chapters in the Commonwealth's recent history are dismaying. An earlier Secretary General responded imaginatively to the trend towards more open, liberal politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the apartheid era in South Africa. He helped to orchestrate a remarkable episode when, at a Heads of Government Meeting, three presidents of member states promised to abandon one-party systems in their countries and to introduce genuinely competitive elections. When one of them then lost a presidential election, that Secretary General played a key role in persuading that president that the acceptance of the outcome was a statesmanlike act. In that era, the Commonwealth committed itself to democratic principles and the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group increasingly pressed errant member governments to abide by them.

It is no accident that it was in that period that the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative blossomed within its base in the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London until it acquired enough influence by 1993 to establish offices with a total staff of 50 in New Delhi and Accra as well as London. It remains a significant force. It was also logical that in the era, the Institute (in partnership with Amnesty International's global headquarters in London) created a masters degree in human rights which – unlike all but one other such programmes in the world – was not narrowly focused on the study of law. Instead, it embraced the study of philosophy, history and the social sciences alongside law. From that beginning emerged the broader human rights consortium within the School of Advanced Study.

It is also worth noting that even in periods when the Commonwealth disappoints, it performs certain valuable roles. It has, for example, an admirable record at promoting the interests of small, impoverished member states. A team at Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) which works to strengthen the voice of such countries has stressed that the Commonwealth is the only international forum in which the views and interests of such states are not squashed and disregarded at the outset of any discussions.

II. Comparative studies of the Commonwealth as an international institution

This represents a second sub-field within 'Commonwealth studies'. As the reference above to DFID indicates, analyses that compare the Commonwealth with other international institutions/organisations have proven utility.

This was apparent during the mid-1990s when senior officials in the French foreign ministry invited a scholar from the Institute in London to explain how the Commonwealth functioned. They had concluded that the British had achieved more by promoting genuinely fraternal interactions among member states than the French had with their more dominant approach to their counterpart institution, *La Francophonie*. Changes in French policy ensued after that discussion.

In a similar vein, when the Community of Portuguese Speaking States was established in 1996 -- a year after Mozambique joined the Commonwealth – its design was influenced by consultations with the Commonwealth on how the latter organisation functions.

III. Comparative studies of changes within different Commonwealth member states

This third sub-field is especially promising. When they achieved independence, Commonwealth member states began with rather similar bureaucracies; legal codes; political institutions; modes of policy making; approaches to state-society relations, civil society and media freedom; and much else. Over subsequent decades, those countries have diverged – somewhat or dramatically.

As a result, the Commonwealth provides an especially valuable laboratory in which the varied trajectories within member states can be traced and compared. Those comparisons yield insights into trends within individual Commonwealth countries which analysts who focus only on single countries in isolation often overlook.

Historians, political philosophers, scholars who study law, rights, decolonization, literature and development studies -- and of course the social sciences -- have used those insights to develop rich bodies of work under the broad rubric of 'Commonwealth studies'. Much of their research has been impressively interdisciplinary, and it has often bridged the divide between the humanities and social sciences.

There is plenty here to warrant continued support for 'Commonwealth Studies'.

-- *James Manor, Institute of Commonwealth Studies*