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A Divided Family: Race, the Commonwealth and Brexit

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ABSTRACT *The Commonwealth has long been conceptualised as ‘a family of nations’ in a reflection of the size, diversity and shared values of the organisation. As the discussion in post-Brexit Britain engages with questions of race and immigration, it is important to consider the role the Commonwealth played in the referendum campaigns. The combination of the Leave campaign’s promises to reinforce ties with ‘kith and kin’ in Commonwealth countries with the xenophobia that defined the campaign prompts the question what exactly does the Commonwealth mean in modern Britain? The EU referendum revealed two Commonwealths—one reflecting the backgrounds of Britain’s ethnic minorities, and one centred on the three majority white nations of Australia, New Zealand and Canada. This article will offer an investigation of these conflicting visions of the Commonwealth in the referendum, as well as the voting motivations of Commonwealth nationals and British citizens of Commonwealth descent.*

KEY WORDS: Brexit, ethnic minorities, immigration, old Commonwealth, race, referendum

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Nations is a unique but underrated fellowship that we have degraded in our pursuit of a supposed European dream (now nightmare). As a nation we need to rediscover and strengthen this association. Many are mature parliamentary democracies which share our love of freedom and fair play, live by statute and common law, are respectful of, even affectionate toward, Britain while rejoicing in their individuality, speak our shared mother tongue and have a similar approach to business and trade. They are family. (Mott, 2014)

The above is an excerpt from an article posted on the online news and commentary outlet UKIP Daily by Richard Mott, a supporter of the Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). While these words were published two years before the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU), they summed up one of the more fascinating arguments proposed by the ‘Leave’ campaign—that an exit from the EU would mean turning back to and embracing the Commonwealth. The rhetoric focused primarily on renegotiating trade agreements with Commonwealth

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nations, in essence replacing the EU as a trading bloc with the Commonwealth (Plummer, 2015).¹ What made this argument interesting was the fact the appeal went beyond commercial benefits: the Commonwealth was special because, as one Grassroots Out campaigner wrote in an article on Commonwealth Day, 16 March 2016, ‘The Commonwealth and Britain have a shared history, cultural links, common legal systems, business practices, and much more’ (Chabe, 2016).²

Thus, a British exit from the EU (Brexit) was presented as an opportunity to reconnect with a group of countries—a family of nations and people to use Commonwealth parlance—with much in common. This thinking had its origins in the early 1960s, when the UK first attempted to join what was then the European Economic Community (EEC). In protest, the Anti-Common Market League (ACML) was founded by Conservatives in 1961. Lloyd (2016) described the ACML as a ‘nostalgic nationalist element’ that advocated for British free trade interests, and maintaining connections with white Commonwealth countries in particular. In 1973, following extensive trade negotiations that focused in part on UK access to New Zealand butter and Caribbean sugar, the UK successfully joined the EEC (Lloyd, 2016). A referendum was held in 1975 on continuing membership (Saunders, 2016). The Commonwealth featured in the campaigns of those eager to leave the EEC, with, for example, an official ‘No’ flyer stating ‘Our Commonwealth links are bound to be weakened much further if we stay in the Common Market’ (*Mail on Sunday*, 2015). In 1975, 67.5% of the electorate voted ‘Yes’, a decisive victory for those wanting to remain in the EEC (Onslow, 2016). The 1975 referendum along with the 1973 membership of the EEC have been described by leading Leave campaigners, including Conservative Member of the European Parliament (MEP) David Hannan, UKIP leader Nigel Farage and former Mayor of London Boris Johnson, as the moment the UK ‘betrayed’ the Commonwealth (Lea, 2011; Lis, 2016, p. 23; UK Europe News, 2011).

Running up to the 2016 referendum, the Commonwealth was again used as a campaign tool by those advocating to leave the EU. The way it was used revealed conflicting visions of the Commonwealth. This article will argue that the 2016 EU referendum demonstrated the extent to which there are two Commonwealths—the ‘Old Commonwealth’ or ‘White Dominions’, and the rest of the Commonwealth—and that during the referendum different sections of the British public were provided with different images of the Commonwealth. The iteration of the Old Commonwealth seen during the referendum comprised the majority white nations of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with South Africa, historically both a White Dominion and Old Commonwealth nation, omitted from the list. Ethnic minority British citizens were sold a vision of a Commonwealth that reflected their own heritage, while wider discussion of the Commonwealth focused on the four mostly white Commonwealth nations. Meanwhile, Commonwealth nationals in the UK were largely ignored, despite the considerable size of this constituency. As the UK moves forward following a referendum that revealed some of the most bitter divisions in the country’s modern history, and issues of race and xenophobia are widely discussed, it is important to consider not just how the ‘other’ was treated, but to look at who was considered ‘family’, and why.

The Commonwealth Constituency

During the referendum campaign the Commonwealth was offered by the Leave camp as a potential alternative to the EU in terms of migration and trade. UKIP, historically a

strong supporter of the Commonwealth, was a leading proponent of this view, but it was supported by Leave campaigners across the political spectrum. In the general election campaign of April 2015 Professor Philip Murphy (2015) commented on how the Commonwealth featured—or rather, did not feature—in the various political party manifestos. Of the major parties, the Commonwealth only appeared significantly in the Conservative manifesto, where the party promised to ‘further strengthen our ties with our close Commonwealth allies, Australia, Canada and New Zealand’ (Conservative Party, 2015, pp. 76–77). In reflecting on this relationship with the White Dominions, Murphy wrote, ‘it is difficult not to detect a certain nostalgia for a time when the Commonwealth was idealised as a tight-knit grouping of “kith and kin”’. UKIP’s 2015 manifesto made the strongest references to the Commonwealth, though more generally to the English-speaking nations in the organisation. With UKIP’s right-wing reactionary tendencies in mind, Murphy concluded ‘we might sense a certain desire to side-step the reality of the contemporary Commonwealth, with its 53 very disparate nations, and revive the antiquated notion of the “English Speaking Peoples”—one with which UKIP’s core voters would no doubt feel more comfortable’. The result then is a sense that the Conservative and UKIP vision of the Commonwealth leading into the 2016 referendum was overwhelmingly one focused on white, English-speaking people, particularly from Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

On 15 April 2016 a petition to the UK government was closed. The petition took issue with the eligibility rules in the referendum scheduled for 23 June, claiming that allowing ‘immigrants’ from the Commonwealth, Malta and The Republic of Ireland to vote was ‘a blatant fix of the vote & is a decision for Brits alone’ (Online Petition, 2016). The petition amassed 40,517 signatures and elicited a response from the British government that read in part: ‘The franchise for the EU referendum is based on the franchise for Parliamentary elections. Reflecting our historical ties, this includes Irish and Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK’ (Online Petition, 2016). The strongest proponent of restricting voting to only British citizens was Lord Green of Deddington, chairman of MigrationWatch UK, a think tank that campaigns for tighter borders. In October 2015, Lord Green told *The Telegraph* ‘The issue is not the precise numbers involved, nor how they might vote ... The real issue is surely one of principle ... The aim, in a nutshell, is to ensure that the future of Britain is decided only by those who are British citizens’ (Barnett, 2015). Principles aside, the number really was an issue, and while there was no agreement on the exact figures, estimates were given from 894,000 to 960,000 eligible Commonwealth votes (Ponniiah, 2016). As the referendum drew nearer, reports surfaced about the potential for the ‘Commonwealth vote’ to swing the vote (Howell and Hewish, 2015). On 23 June, 51.9% of the votes were cast in favour of leaving the EU. With a margin of over 1.2 million votes, and the distinct impossibility of a diverse group of hundreds of thousands voting the same way, these fears were proved unfounded (Electoral Commission, 2016).

While the prospect of hundreds of thousands of votes was acknowledged, neither Leave nor Remain campaigned particularly strongly for the vote of Commonwealth nationals in the UK, arguably because of the toxicity of anti-immigration sentiment, and strength of Lord Green’s petition. On the rare occasions where Commonwealth citizens in the UK were addressed directly about their vote, the individual doing so was usually a Commonwealth dignitary. In the case of the two other EU/Commonwealth nations, the High Commissioner of the Republic of Cyprus used a London School of Economics

blog to express the country's official stance: 'the UK should remain in the EU' (Evriviades, 2016). In the post, Euripides L. Evriviades addressed 'approximately 250,000–300,000 British citizens of Cypriot origin' and thousands of Cypriot students and workers resident in the UK. Offering another pro-EU voice, the prime minister of Malta, Dr Joseph Muscat, noted that one of the defining elements of exit negotiations would be that 'The United Kingdom would need to be treated as a friend but not family' (Muscat, 2016). Evriviades and Muscat were echoed by other Commonwealth leaders, including the prime ministers of India, Canada, New Zealand and Australia who publicly backed the UK remaining in the EU (Leonard, 2016). When asked for her comment, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Baroness Patricia Scotland, said 'the Commonwealth does not set itself up in competition with Europe—we are partners' (James, 2016). Significantly, these Commonwealth leaders (including Muscat, the current Commonwealth chair in office) spoke about the referendum in terms of international relations with the UK, without addressing their own citizens resident in the country who were eligible to vote; as New Zealand's Prime Minister John Key noted, it was for the 'British people to decide' (BBC News, 2016a).

While there was no concerted effort to canvass Commonwealth voters in the UK, Commonwealth nationals in the country nevertheless engaged in the debate, and voted. In the run-up to the referendum, material was published featuring supporters of both camps, addressing the potential benefits for the Commonwealth of Britain staying in or leaving the EU. In one example (Ponniah, 2016), the BBC interviewed a handful of Commonwealth voters representing Malaysia, Canada and Australia. Of the two women from Malaysia, one was planning to vote Remain, citing lack of information about a Brexit approach as crucial, and noting a failure by both campaigns to explain how Commonwealth nations may be affected by the result. The other was planning to vote Leave because, according to the BBC, 'Her vote will be pinned on hopes that immigration policy will change in a way that benefits Commonwealth citizens if the UK no longer has to abide by free movement within the EU' (Ponniah, 2016). Shortly after the referendum, the BBC reporter Farai Sevenzo (2016) investigated why some black African migrants voted Leave. According to Sevenzo, some of the 1.8% of the UK population who identify as black African may have voted Leave because 'the expansion of the EU had drastically reduced the job chances of Africans from the Commonwealth and beyond'. These combined issues of jobs and immigration weighed heavily on referendum voters of all backgrounds.

Despite Commonwealth nationals resident in the UK being largely ignored during the referendum, Britain's ethnic minority population, most of whom have Commonwealth heritage (see below), were canvassed by Leave campaigners. In February the official Vote Leave campaign published a letter signed by 80 'patriotic Britons of Commonwealth background' involved in business and culture (BBC News, 2016b). In supporting the Leave campaign, the signatories addressed immigration: '... our immigration policy forces us, in effect, to turn away qualified workers from the Commonwealth so as to free up unlimited space for migrants from the EU ... The descendants of the men who volunteered to fight for Britain in two world wars must stand aside in favour of people with no connection to the United Kingdom'. The argument that leaving the EU would allow for more or easier Commonwealth immigration was echoed by Priti Patel, then Minister of State for Employment and arguably the most prominent non-white Leave campaigner. Figures published in May 2016 revealed the 2015 net migration in

the UK hit 333,000, the second highest figure on record and well above the 100,000 target the Conservatives were working towards (BBC News, 2016c). Patel argued that EU freedom of movement meant little control over EU citizens moving to the UK, with the result being tighter government restrictions on non-EU migration to try to lower these figures. Consequently: ‘This means that we cannot bring in the talents and the skills we need to support our economy. By voting to leave we can take back control of our immigration policies, save our curry houses and join the rest of the world’ (Cecil, 2016).

In discussing the plight of that most British of staples—the curry house—Patel was speaking specifically to and of British South Asians. Patel’s views were supported by the Vote Leave campaign, which sent out leaflets to Muslim voters and British Asian voters arguing that leaving the EU would allow for greater migration from Commonwealth nations, namely India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Pickard, 2016; Majeed, 2016). Across the bench, Birmingham Labour MP Khalid Mahmood was quoted in a January 2016 Labour Leave flyer as saying ‘We have to end EU visa discrimination against our Commonwealth Citizens. It is a matter of justice’ (Labour Leave, 2016). Mahmood later defected from the Vote Leave campaign, criticising the campaign’s racist undertones (McCann, 2016).

A pre-referendum poll by the British Election Study suggested that while white voters were virtually evenly split, ethnic minority voters would vote two-to-one in favour of Remain (Gibbon, 2016). Writing for *The Guardian*, Nazia Parveen (2016) talked to individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds who were planning to vote to leave, publishing the thoughts of one man who identified as Anglo-Pakistani: ‘We have worked so hard to earn the right to live here and we contribute to the communities. What we don’t want is more people coming in who won’t bring anything positive and will just take’.

In expanding on this issue, Parveen referenced a December 2015 report by the Runnymede Trust, an independent think tank working on race equality and race relations. From the report: ‘Long-settled [black and minority ethnic] migrants often feel they have had a difficult time in Britain, or at least following their initial arrival; they then may see or think that newer migrants have had better or easier experiences’ (Khan and Weekes-Bernard, 2015, p. 33). According to census data, non-white long-settled migrants in the UK are largely from South Asian or Afro-Caribbean Commonwealth nations, with India being the country most represented in this group (ONS, 2012a, 2012b). As Iman Amrani (2016) wrote in her investigation of Leave voters with migrant parents from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean: ‘Their story in Great Britain is one of struggle, and the battles they had to fight to integrate, in the years before equality laws, were more difficult than the ones facing EU migrants today’.

For Amrani, this reflection on the difficulties of their own experiences suggests why some ethnic minority British voters could support a Leave campaign that became increasingly defined by its racism and xenophobia (BBC News, 2016d). Writing for the Remain-backing *InFacts* in April 2016, Yojana Sharma squarely addressed the push to court voters with Commonwealth heritage:

... standing up for Commonwealth interests as a Brexit strategy is nothing but a cynical ploy and a form of nostalgia for the British Empire dressed up to suit the Leave campaign ... The notion that the far-from-homogenous Commonwealth is

‘more like us’ is neither sincere nor honest. What is galling is that the same argument was absent when Black and Asian Commonwealth migrants first arrived in the 1960s and 70s. On the contrary—I remember it well—immigrants were derided for looking different, smelling of curry and not fitting in with ‘our ways’.

Sharma highlights the key conflict in the Leave campaign’s use of the Commonwealth as a campaign strategy. Ethnic minority voters with Commonwealth heritage were sold one image of the Commonwealth following Brexit—one where their South Asian or African family could immigrate more easily to the UK—while the rest of the British population was presented with a Commonwealth centred on Australia, New Zealand and Canada, with trade defining the relationship with the other countries.

Kith and Kin

On Commonwealth Day in March 2016, UKIP Commonwealth spokesman and MEP James Carver (2016) wrote ‘It is increasingly evident that a reinvigorated Commonwealth, co-operating ever more closely on trade and sharing historic and democratic values, offers a real alternative to our membership of the European Union’. The fact UKIP has a Commonwealth spokesman is clear evidence of the political party’s long-standing affection for the organisation. During the 2015 general election UKIP leader Nigel Farage had made waves when he said

I have to confess I do have a slight preference. I do think, naturally, that people from India and Australia are in some ways more likely to speak English, understand common law and have a connection with this country than some people that come perhaps from countries that haven’t fully recovered from being behind the iron curtain (Mawson, 2015).

The Leave campaign presented the Commonwealth as a viable economic alternative to the EU, with an added bonus of working with an organisation that already had historical connections to the UK. In May, Hugo Swire, the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, offered the official government response, beginning, ‘It is not an either-or choice. The UK needs and can have both’ (Swire, 2016). Swire tackled the issues used by the Leave campaign, including the all-important trade and immigration. Concerning trade, Swire noted the important position the UK held as the Commonwealth’s entry into the EU. On the issue of immigration, he argued, ‘Our membership of the EU does not prevent Commonwealth citizens from coming to the United Kingdom. Anyone suggesting that it would be different or easier is just raising false hopes by suggesting we would water down those criteria’. This point was made more forcefully three weeks before the referendum by political sociologist Stephen Ashe (2016), who wrote about UKIP’s own immigration proposals: ‘UKIP have no intention of opening up Britain’s borders to our “Kith & Kin” in the Commonwealth’.

Conservative politicians who supported the Commonwealth-as-EU-alternative included the two leading figures in the Leave campaign—Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove, and former London Mayor, Boris Johnson. Johnson’s comments in particular left an impression, weeks before he was considered for his current role of

Foreign Secretary. In a 2013 article for *The Telegraph*, Johnson had written that with the 1973 referendum to join the EEC, the UK had ‘snootily disregarded’ and ‘betrayed our relationships with Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand’. With his declared status as a friend of the Commonwealth, in April 2016 Johnson used an editorial in *The Sun* to respond to President Barack Obama’s appeal to British voters to remain in the EU. Johnson recounted a story about a bust of Winston Churchill that had been removed from the White House’s Oval Office in 2012. While the White House had clarified in 2012 that the bust had only been on loan during the Bush Administration (Pfeiffer, 2012), Johnson proposed a different theory: ‘Some said it was a snub to Britain. Some said it was a symbol of the part-Kenyan President’s ancestral dislike of the British Empire—of which Churchill had been such a fervent defender’ (Johnson, 2016).

The insinuation that President Obama could be anti-British because of his Kenyan father appeared deeply antithetical to Johnson’s and his fellow Leave campaigners’ insistence that leaving the EU would allow for a closer relationship with the Commonwealth. After all, barring the two recent additions of Mozambique and Rwanda, the entire membership of the Commonwealth comprises states formerly part of the British Empire. In one of the many commentaries on Johnson’s highly provocative statement, Kiri Kankhwende (2016) of *Media Diversified* wrote ‘By Boris’ logic, the cloud of suspicion should extend to anyone with heritage in a Commonwealth country’. The Africans for Britain group—which had planned to campaign primarily in favour of trade and immigration potential in Brexit Britain—promptly left the Leave campaign, referring to it as at risk of takeover from a ‘radical wing which is likely to scapegoat immigrants’ (Waterson, 2016). Writing after the referendum, Matthew Whittle from the University of Leeds offered one suggestion for Johnson’s ability, on the one hand, to refer to Obama’s ‘ancestral dislike of the British empire’, while on the other, calling for greater Commonwealth cooperation. In his reflections on both Johnson’s and Farage’s perceptions of the Commonwealth, Whittle encapsulated the thinking of two men who reflected their respective parties’ attitudes to the Commonwealth: ‘Given their proven track-records of inciting suspicion of non-white “outsiders”, however, one can only assume that by saying “our friends” in the Commonwealth what is actually meant is the old “white Dominions” of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada’ (Whittle, 2016).

Referendum Results

At the time of writing, there is no data that indicates how Commonwealth nationals voted in the referendum, so it is difficult to ascertain what the split may have been within this diverse group. However, demographic information combined with the polling conducted by Lord Ashcroft Polls (Lord Ashcroft, 2016) provides some clues as to how people with Commonwealth heritage—including British citizens—voted. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), in 2011 around 14% of the usual resident population in England and Wales did not identify as white. Of this group, 7.5% identified as Asian or Asian British; specifically, 2.5% identified as Indian, making this the largest ethnic minority group, followed by Pakistanis at 2.0% (ONS, 2012a). India is also the country of birth for the largest number of overseas-born residents, followed by Poland (the result of substantial migration since the country’s 2004 entry into the

EU), then Pakistan (ONS, 2012b). Finally, in 2012, Indian nationals were granted more work-related visas than the next nine nationalities combined (Hewish, 2014, chart 8, p. 19). According to a May 2016 House of Commons briefing paper concerning migration, in 2014 54.6% of immigrants in the UK were not EU nationals. Of that percentage, 9% were nationals of Old Commonwealth countries, while 15% were from the so-called New Commonwealth (Hawkins, 2016, table 1, p. 10). Significantly, the paper defines the Old Commonwealth to include South Africa which, while historically correct, does not reflect the way the term was used during the referendum.

Taken together, these figures suggest two things: first, that the majority of England and Wales's ethnic minority population have ties to the Commonwealth countries of India and Pakistan, and that the overwhelming majority of Commonwealth immigrants resident in the UK are nationals of non-white countries, with India again being the main source. These facts are important because they show that, despite the Conservatives' favoured image of white Australian, Canadian and New Zealander Commonwealth 'kith and kin'—as part of a wider British world—Commonwealth brothers and sisters in the UK are most likely to be of Indian descent. The perception of a Commonwealth in which Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians are the UK's closest cultural neighbours obscures the fact that, for decades, the Commonwealth in the UK has been represented by people of colour from the Asian subcontinent who have themselves become part of the fabric of British society.

Returning to the Lord Ashcroft Polls figures, at 73%, black people were the largest demographic group in support of remaining, while 67% of Asian voters (a category not including Chinese voters) voted to remain. These figures compare with the 47% of white voters who backed Remain (Lord Ashcroft, 2016). According to these polls, which echo the pre-referendum British Election Survey, Britain's ethnic minorities voted by strong margins in favour of remaining in the EU. While we have no figures specifically breaking down the 'Commonwealth vote', these figures offer insight into how people with ties to the Commonwealth voted. Despite the statistics and recent British history demonstrating that, at the personal level, the UK's closest Commonwealth connection is overwhelmingly centred on India and other non-white countries, there remains a push within British politics and Commonwealth groups towards Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Freedom of Movement

In November 2014 the newly formed think tank Commonwealth Exchange published a report and recommendations titled 'How to Solve a Problem like a Visa: The Unhappy State of Commonwealth Migration in the UK' (Hewish, 2014). The report was a thorough investigation of the myriad ways in which Commonwealth immigration to the UK and visa policies have developed over the years, and how these processes could be improved. Significantly, the recommendations encompassed a range of Commonwealth countries. One of the recommendations, for 'bilateral labour mobility zones', was based on an idea proposed by then London Mayor and post-Brexit Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris Johnson, who also wrote the report's foreword. Johnson had proposed a 'bilateral Free Labour Mobility Zone' between Britain and Australia in the 2013 *Telegraph* article mentioned above, titled 'The Aussies are just

like us, so let's stop kicking them out'. The proposal was part of a wider response to what he thought was a deep bond between the two nations: 'I mean that we British are more deeply connected with the Australians—culturally and emotionally—than with any other country on earth' (Johnson, 2013). In the foreword to 'How to Solve a Problem' Johnson repeated this sentiment, noting the 'myriad enduring bonds' between Australia and the UK specifically, while also referencing economic growth in India and Africa (Hewish, 2014, p. 3). In its report, the Commonwealth Exchange expanded the mobility zone from Johnson's suggested Australia to also include New Zealand and Canada, based on the current Trans-Tasman Travel Agreement between Australia and New Zealand. The writer, Tim Hewish, added that following economic development, other Commonwealth countries could be included in the proposed scheme (Hewish, 2014, p. 33).

The follow-up to the 2014 report saw a development from calls for more accessible Commonwealth-wide migration in the UK to a focus on free movement between the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In December 2015 the Commonwealth Exchange became the formal policy arm of the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), the oldest accredited civil society organisation in the Commonwealth (Hewish, 2015). Meanwhile, in November 2015 a Change.org petition to allow freedom of movement between the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada for citizens of those countries reached over 100,000 signatures.³ According to Commonwealth Exchange, the think tank's 2014 report 'kick-started' (Hewish, 2016a, p. 1) the petition which was set up by the Commonwealth Freedom of Movement Organisation (CFMO), an organisation advocating free movement between the four countries only. In response to the report and petition, between November 2015 and March 2016 the RCS commissioned polling to gauge support for free labour mobility between the four countries. The results showed 82% of New Zealanders, 75% of Canadians, 70% of Australians and 58% of Britons in favour of this freedom of movement (Hewish, 2016a, p. 1). In the April 2016 Commonwealth Exchange/RCS report on the polling, the shared language, legal system, economic and family ties, and head of state were stated as indicative of the 'unique bond' between the four nations (Hewish, 2016a, p. 1). It would be interesting to consider the results of a similar poll taken in the UK closer to the referendum (UK constituents were polled in November 2015), or a poll concerning Commonwealth-wide freedom of movement. The polling report was released in mid-March 2016 and received press coverage from leading outlets in the four countries (Hewish, 2016b).

While it is unclear whether there is a continuing relationship between Commonwealth Exchange/RCS and the CFMO, it is important that the Commonwealth as an organisation continues to represent the interests of all Commonwealth nations moving forward. There are indeed cultural similarities between Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK, and comparable economic development. However, to ignore the fact that one of the similarities between the four countries is the ethnicity of the populations is to ignore the long-standing problem of racism within British society (which indeed is a deeply contentious issue in the other three countries). Following a referendum that revealed the very worst of British racism and xenophobia, it is important to engage with these issues head-on. This means acknowledging that in popular political discourse in the UK the term 'Old Commonwealth' is increasingly being used to mean 'white Commonwealth', and further that 'Commonwealth' itself risks being redefined as just four nations—a development that undermines the remit of the modern Commonwealth as a non-racial

multinational association, while reinforcing the racial hierarchies that defined the birth of the organisation in the wake of Britain's empire. Shortly before the referendum, Ashe (2016) provided one of the most forceful criticisms of the Commonwealth narrative. Ashe reflected on Paul Gilroy's 2005 term 'postcolonial melancholy'—the mixture of guilt and pride that marks Britain's relationship to its imperial past—to consider the focus on the white Commonwealth countries and the racist and imperial nostalgic undertones of this line of thinking:

The purpose of any trade deal with the Commonwealth would not be to spread the wealth. For UKIP and Conservatives such as Gove and [Chris] Grayling, the EU prevents Britain from being great. For them, Britain's resurrection is to be found in the Commonwealth. They would rely on both old and new forms of economic, political and cultural domination to control former colonies. So when UKIP and others make reference to shared laws, customs and traditions, it must be pointed out that these are products of colonial rule.

Conclusion

In the period between 16 June and 30 June 2016, the UK saw a 42% rise in hate crimes compared with the same period in 2015 (BBC News, 2016e). A report by social media activists titled #PostRefRacism analysed 645 racist and xenophobic incidents reported via social media, noting that 'abuse targeted anyone perceived to be "foreign"; [it was] anti-immigrant rather than anti-European' (Komaromi and Singh, 2016, p. 5). In the wake of a referendum that centred so strongly on conceptions of Britishness and who (if anyone) deserved entry to the UK, looking outward to former colonies and ranking their similarities to Britain is a problematic act. It seeks to divide the Commonwealth into the 'most' like the British and the rest. It seeks to reinforce the stratified structures of empire that the Commonwealth rhetoric of equality was intended—at least on paper—to move beyond. Significantly, in ignoring the Commonwealth heritage of the majority of non-white British people who have shaped the country's culture and society, and instead claiming the Old Commonwealth as kith and kin, it seeks to place whiteness as a key criterion denoting commonality.

In the same way that arguments about economics obscured the racist and xenophobic elements of the referendum campaigning, it is important too not to ignore the appeal to racial homogeneity that (re)connecting with white Commonwealth countries offers. This article has argued that the EU referendum revealed two Commonwealths, served to different populations. In a world where the UK will be looking to make stronger alliances, highly privileging majority white nations over the rest of the Commonwealth 'family' under the guise of shared culture and history risks deeply dividing the organisation along racial lines. Such a development would be the very antithesis of the declared values of the modern Commonwealth.

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Notes

1. According to UK government figures released in May 2016, the Commonwealth accounted for 10% of the UK's trade, a figure that has remained stable for the past 10 years. India, Australia, Canada, Singapore and South Africa were the UK's five largest Commonwealth trade partners (Dar and Webb, 2016).
2. One of the enduring legacies of the 'common legal systems' instated by the British is that 42 of the 54 Commonwealth states continue to criminalise homosexuality. These 42 states make up more than half of the countries worldwide that criminalise homosexuality (Lennox and Waites, 2013, p. 1).
3. The Commonwealth Exchange polling report states March 2015 as the month the petition surpassed 100,000 signatures. However, the CFMO page cites 8 November 2015 as the date the petition crossed this threshold (Skinner, 2015). The petition remains open; on 3 September 2016 it had reached 161,807 signatures.

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