

Commonwealth, Common Goals

BY BROCK WEIR

Much has been said in recent weeks about Canada's place in the world.

Actually, Canada's place in the world, and just what exactly that entails, has been a point of discussion, debate, and, yes, contention, since the very establishment of this country by Confederation in 1867.

While we Canadians, I believe, generally have a strong sense of self at the individual level, that's not always the case in the broader picture, and we're reminded of this from time to time.

Prior to the outbreak of the present war in Iran, one of the most potent immediate reasons for considering Canadian identity and this country's place in the world was ongoing economical and philosophical conflict with the United States, once one of our most trusted allies.

The question of what it means to be Canadian in a global context was posed well beyond Canada earlier this year when Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered his now-famous speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he called on middle powers like Canada to find strength in common ground.

"We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition," said Carney on the international rules-based order. "Over the past two decades, a series of crises in finance, health, energy and geopolitics have laid bare the risks of extreme global integration. But more recently, great powers have begun using economic integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited.

"The multilateral institutions on which middle powers have relied - the WTO, the UN, the COP - the very architecture of collective problem solving, are under threat. And as a result, many countries are drawing the same conclusions: that they must develop greater strategic autonomy: in energy, food, critical minerals, in finance and supply chains. And this impulse is understandable. A country that cannot feed itself, fuel itself, or defend itself has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself. But let's be clear-eyed about where this leads: a world of fortresses will be poorer, more fragile and less sustainable?"

"Middle powers must act together because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu. But I'd also say that great powers can afford, for now, to go it alone. They have the market size, the military capacity and the leverage to dictate terms. Middle powers do not. But when we only negotiate bilaterally with a hegemon, we negotiate from weakness. We accept what's offered. We compete with each other to be the most accommodating. This is not sovereignty. It's the performance of sovereignty while accepting subordination. In a world of great power rivalry, the countries in between have a choice: compete with each other for favour or to combine to create a third path with impact. We shouldn't allow the rise of hard power to blind us to the fact that the power of legitimacy, integrity and rules will remain strong - if we choose to wield them together."

Underscoring this point, the Prime Minister said, "We know the old order is not coming back. We shouldn't mourn it. Nostalgia is not a strategy."

Nostalgia for our previous relationship with the United States is certainly not a strategy, I think we can all agree, but are there also opportunities in what so many consider to be nostalgia?

Monday was Commonwealth Day, an annual celebration held in the United Kingdom and in many parts of the world on the second Monday in March to celebrate the heritage, close bonds, and shared visions for the future of the more than 50 member states, most of which, but not all, have roots within the former British Empire.

It's a day that hardly causes a ripple in Canada, yet one that should be given much more significance.

Some might see this collection of member states that is the Commonwealth ? several of which are considered ?middle powers? ? as, at best, an exercise in nostalgia for what once was (and, in many respects, what was once? well, was far from great), but it doesn't need to be. It's a global platform to share ideas and look to the future in conversations that aren't dominated by geopolitical behemoths.

It's an organization that, in addition to Canada and the United Kingdom, includes Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and more, along with scores of emerging nations and economies in the Caribbean and Central America, many parts of Africa, Asia, and the Oceanic states.

We might not all see the world in the same way, but given our common roots, each member of the Commonwealth has a bit of a head start in understanding where each other has come from, where each other is headed ? and in forging or renewing links, that is often half the battle.

These links were not only demonstrated at the start of the week at Westminster Abbey as representatives from member states joined the King and Queen, High Commissioners from each member nation, cultural representatives and more in a cavalcade in what brings this disparate group of countries together, but also in Canberra, Australia, when the Prime Minister of Canada made a rare speech before the Australian Parliament ? fresh off his visit to another member state, India.

?For us, as two democracies in an age of polarisation, as two dynamic trading nations in a time of disrupted supply chains, and as two middle powers in an era of strategic competition, Australia and Canada must seek and create new ways to stand with and for each other,? said Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, welcoming Carney into Parliament. ?For all the comfortable ties of old affection, what makes the friendship between Australia and Canada noteworthy is what we do not share. We do not share a border, a region, a hemisphere, or any market smaller than the global one. Yet this makes the connection between our countries more meaningful, not less, because our cooperation, our partnership, is a positive choice, not a necessity?.

?When we act together, we demonstrate to our citizens that government is not a passive institution. It is an instrument for positive change. And what's more, when we send a message to all those nations that look to us as equals, as peers, as neighbours, and as leaders, that they too have a choice, agency, and a part to play, because peace, security, and prosperity are not the preserve of the great powers alone. They are our common cause and our collective responsibility.?

Hopefully this is the start of a new era of understanding and cooperation between a unique group of nations that have an understanding of each other, face common challenges, and can forge unique solutions together.

Some might find the Commonwealth as simply a nostalgic vestige of our history, but, to my mind, it offers significant opportunity that has been all too often overlooked.

Here's to our shared futures, if we take advantage of them!