

A Global Paradox

As Canada celebrates Commonwealth Day and *la Journée Internationale de la Francophonie*, Chad Gaffield ponders the relevance and importance of the two organizations while member states weigh the benefits of economic integration against the desire for cultural sovereignty

The continuing reconfiguration of national and political boundaries and alliances is a surprising feature of our times. In the light of history, it was only a moment or two ago when everyone thought the world would soon be neatly divided into distinct and sovereign countries. And these countries were expected to look increasingly similar as modernization slowly but surely swept over the globe. Did anyone predict that the early 21st century would be characterized by competing forces of globalism drawing people together on the one hand, and profound cultural, religious and political forces driving us into separate, sometimes hostile camps on the other?

The month of March provides an occasion to reflect on such questions as we celebrate Commonwealth Day and *La Journée Internationale de la Francophonie*. Both represent the forces that try to draw the world together while preserving local identities.

Canada is one of a handful of countries in both associations, and here the word Commonwealth still conjures up images of British imperialism despite the fact that national self-determination is one of the pillars that now support the organization. The notion of the Francophonie currently resonates much better in Canada although efforts to bolster the French language certainly do not generate enthusiasm from sea to sea to sea. What often gets overlooked is that both organizations have changed in keeping with the changing times, and their priorities now converge in many ways. The key difference remains language. English is the sole working language of the Commonwealth while the promotion of French is a priority for the Francophonie.

What is perhaps most surprising about current geo-political reconfigurations is that they are underpinned by opposing rationales, one view favouring integra-

tion as a way to achieve national objectives, the other separation. For example, the emergence of the European Union reflected the increasing conviction that economic growth depended upon the integration of neighbouring national

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economies. Not that long ago, the creation of specific national currencies (and then passports and so on) was seen as essential to sovereignty.

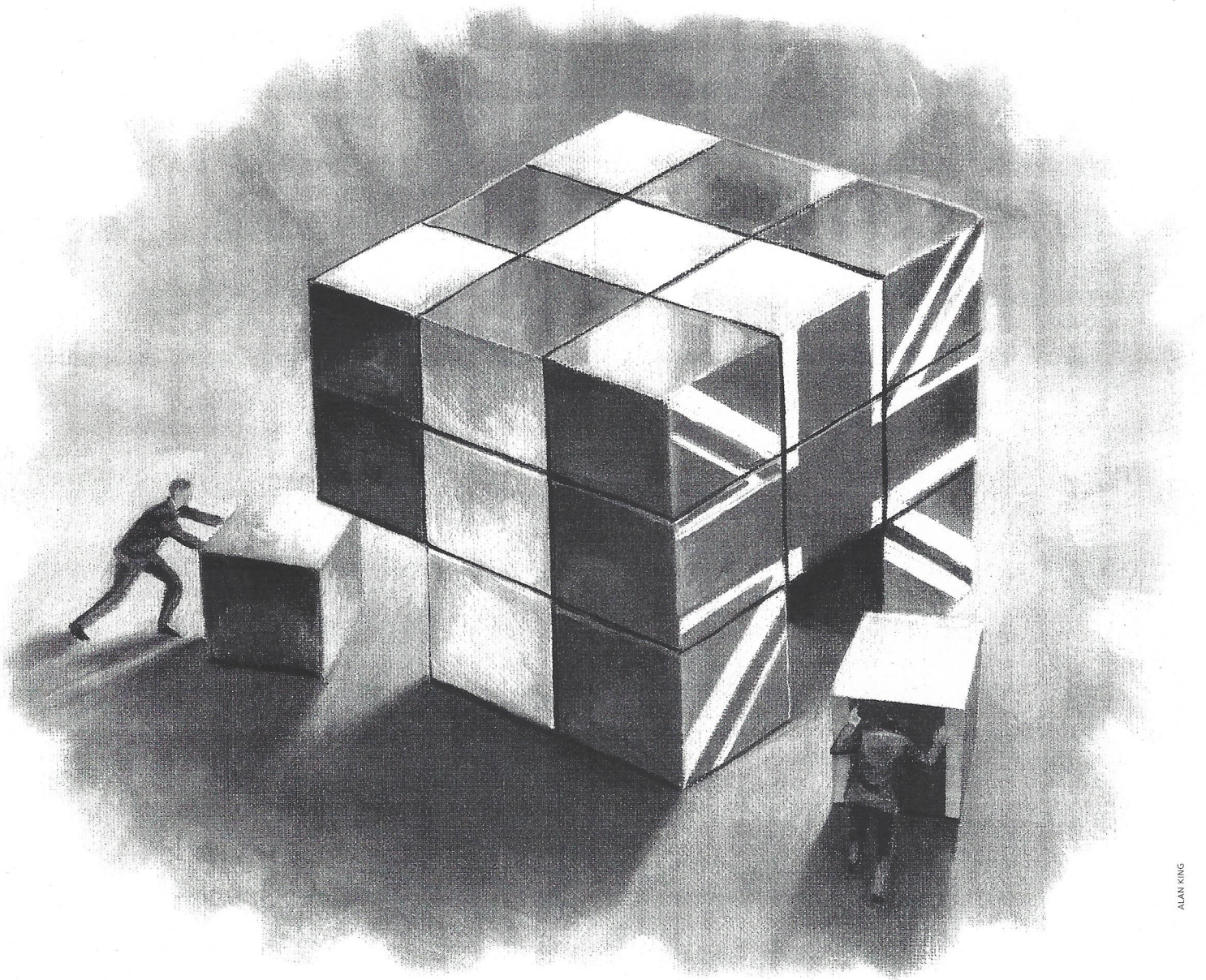
This belief has largely given way to a new confidence that national identity does not depend on such trappings. But at the same time as the EU was offering a new model of continental integration, the rationale of separation underpinned the creation of new European countries that clearly prized their ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage. One conclusion might be that economic forces now propel societies toward international unions while

socio-cultural preoccupations can drive them apart. These competing forces explain why the increasing use of English as the working language of the EU is now raising profound questions about personal and collective identity.

The examples of the Commonwealth and the Francophonie offer a different way to think about how historic ties and identities might lead to an improved quality of life. The dropping of "British" from the Commonwealth's official name following India and Pakistan's independence in 1947 was part of a shift that de-centered London in favour of former colonies that spoke of freedom and equality, and paid little heed to the original British connection.

Among the Commonwealth's 53 members (and the organization does have its share of strange friends – it's hard to imagine the similarities between Pakistan and Australia; Gambia and Grenada), Mozambique became the first without historic ties to Britain to join in 1995 and francophone Cameroon followed soon thereafter. Talk is mostly about democracy, human rights, and social development, and it's no surprise that Commonwealth Day 2005 has the slogan "Education – creating opportunity, realizing potential."

The social and cultural objectives of the Commonwealth are similar to some of the ambitions of the Francophonie with the exception of language. From its early days in 1970, the centre of the Francophonie was in the former French colonies and the association now includes more than 63 countries and governments on five continents. Like their Commonwealth counterparts, the members of *L'Agence Internationale de la Francophonie* emphasize the importance of teaching and research as well as democracy, peace and human rights. However, not only are the members of the Francophonie explicitly linked by their use of



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the French language, they are also committed to its preservation and promotion. In his message concerning this year's celebrations, the secretary general of the organisation, Abdou Diouf emphasizes "toute la richesse de la diversité de nos cultures..." (translation: all the richness of our diverse cultures.)

In the late 19th century, some observers in Canada agreed with a common prediction that English was becoming the language of the world through its role in international commerce. By the mid-20th century, dreams of the future took this

sentiment further in predicting that everything from fertility rates to social structures were converging on trails blazed by western societies. In this view, a global culture was emerging as societies around the world increasingly pursued similar objectives "our (western) way."

The experience of recent decades has called such predictions into question, and the daily news offers stark reminders about the vast differences in cultures and economies around the world despite continued noise about the power of globalization. Commonwealth Day and La

Journee Internationale de la Francophonie could prompt us to think about how we see differences such as those of language and culture relating to values that we view as universal, and why we think the world's experiment in diversity versus globalism will – or will not – lead to democracy, human rights and peace worldwide.

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