

'The Politics of Imperial Commerce: The Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire, 1886-1914'

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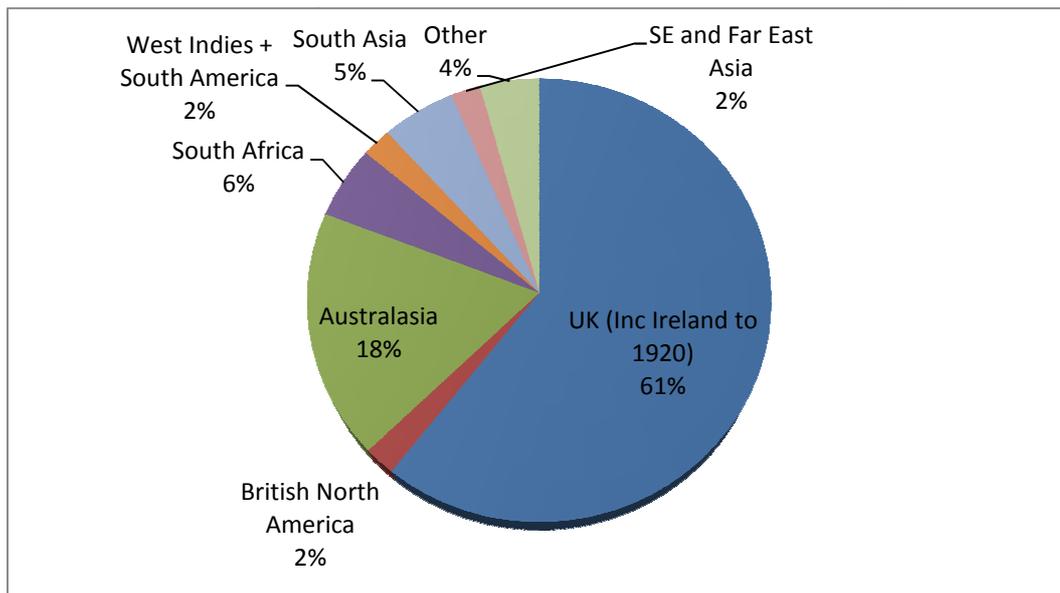
Abstract

In the last sixty years, scholars working on the history of Britain's relations with the self-governing settlement empire have tended to operate within two paradigms. The first, developed by Robinson and Gallagher and revised by Cain and Hopkins, understands these relations using models of informal empire. In recent years, a second line of interpretation has emerged emphasising the role of shared culture and dense networks in shaping what scholars such as Bridge and Fedorovich have called the 'British world'. Recently this literature has begun to acquire economic dimensions through Magee and Thompson's work on the British world's 'cultural economy'. This paper interrogates and ultimately critiques both approaches. It does so through a focus on a neglected pan-imperial institution: the Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire, described by the economist William Ashley as the 'unofficial commercial parliament of the empire'. From 1886 until 1972 this met periodically, bringing together representatives of chambers of commerce (themselves neglected institutions) across the empire to discuss matters of political economy and to network, interactions lubricated by imperial loyalty and (greater) British identity. The paper draws heavily on archival work on the papers of the Congress at the London Metropolitan Archive to reconstruct the history of the Congress from 1886-1914. It first examines the degree to which Magee and Thompson's model of the cultural economy with its emphasis on networks and information flows provides sufficient explanation of the Congresses activities. It argues that while these factors played a role neither was central to its purpose. Rather it is argued that the Congress was conceived as a single business lobby seeking to shape the framework of political economy within which Commerce operated. This highlights the importance of pan-imperial institutions of governance for commerce (responsible government notwithstanding) and suggests the persistence and importance of a political life encompassing Britain and the dominions ('Greater Britain' to use a contemporary phrase). It is the existence of this quasi-federal politics which, in suggesting the existence of a federal polity (however nebulous) poses the most profound challenge to both paradigms outlined above.

1) *Introduction: The Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*

In June 1886, the London Chamber of Commerce's journal announced that 'the most important commercial congress which has ever been held in any country' would take place that August in London to coincide with the Indian and Colonial Exhibition. The Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire (CCCE at times hereafter) would bring together British chambers of commerce gathering for the annual meeting of the Association of Chambers of Commerce of the United Kingdom with chambers from across the Empire.¹ Chambers of commerce emerged in the anglophone world from the mid-eighteenth century as voluntary associations bringing together businessmen in particular cities or regions to discuss and lobby on matters of common interest.² The movement spread dramatically in the nineteenth century. Although only founded in 1882, and hence a newcomer, the London chamber of commerce instantly aspired to lead the movement and raise its status.³ The CCCE was an early initiative of the London chamber, and although the exact motivations remain obscure, the organisation of the Congress seems to reflect the chamber's bid for national and pan-imperial pre-eminence.⁴

Figure 1: A Breakdown of the Participant Chambers of the first Congress of the Chambers of Commerce of the Empire, 1886



Source: *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, August 1886, p. 1.

¹ *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, June 1886, p. 127.

² Bennett, *Local Voice*, *passim*; Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, pp. 146-150.

³ Bennett, *Local Voice*, pp. 194-200.

⁴ The earliest mention in the archives of the London chamber comes from December 1885, by which point preparations were well advanced. LMA: CLC/B/150/MS16466/2 (London Chambers of Commerce Papers): 'Organising Committee', *Rough Minute Book*, 15 Dec 1885. See also 'A Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire' *Morning Post*, 16 Oct 1885, 'Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire', *Daily News*, 16 Oct 1885, 'Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire', *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Oct 1885.

90 Chambers and over 250 delegates, along with their wives, attended the 1886 Congress. Figure 1 above shows the approximate breakdown of participant chambers. The majority came from Britain and a further 26 per cent from the self-governing colonies. The settlement empire (and particularly Canada) was more prominent in proceedings than these numbers suggest. The Canadian High Commissioner, Charles Tupper, and his predecessor Alexander Galt attended, along with the colonial agents-generals (official representatives of the other self-governing colonies). Galt and Tupper proved particularly vocal in proceedings. The Congress met for two days under the chairmanship of the president of the London Chamber of Commerce, J. Herbert Tritton. At the opening of the Congress, Tritton, welcomed "our own kith and kin from the other side of the world" continuing, 'Commercial interests afford us a common ground for discussion, and not for barren debate, but for the discussion which moulds opinion and leads to important results.'⁵ Papers were read and discussed on emigration, postal and telegraphic communications, imperial federation, the codification and assimilation of the commercial law of the empire, the state guarantee of war risks, the silver question (passing a bimetallist resolution), and Bills of Lading.⁵ The Congress was accompanied by the usual rounds of social events which typified the imperial capital: a banquet at St James Hall (attracting 400 guests); a *Conversazione* at the Exhibition (attended by 1700 people including 'several Indians, and many Colonists'); a reception hosted by Tritton; a garden party where the 1500 guests braved 'two heavy showers of rain' which 'only tended to refresh the carefully kept gardens'.⁶⁷

The 1886 congress generated a pan-imperial, or pan-Commonwealth, organisation which sustained itself for approximately 89 years. The CCCE reconvened in London in 1892, 1896, and 1900 – shifting location to the halls of the trades associations of the City. In 1903, in a new departure, it met in Montreal, establishing a pattern of alternating between London and the dominions. It reconvened in London in 1906, in 1909 in Sydney, in London again in 1912, and was scheduled to travel to Toronto in 1915 when the Great War intervened. Meetings resumed in Toronto in 1920 and persisted through the interwar period into the era of decolonisation. The last congress was held in 1972, and what had become the Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce wound down in 1975.⁸ The congresses drew together very large numbers of chambers, and even more delegates. Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the chambers

⁵ Ibid., June 1886, pp. 127-8; Ibid., July 1886, pp. 157-8; *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, Aug. 1886, pp.1-2.

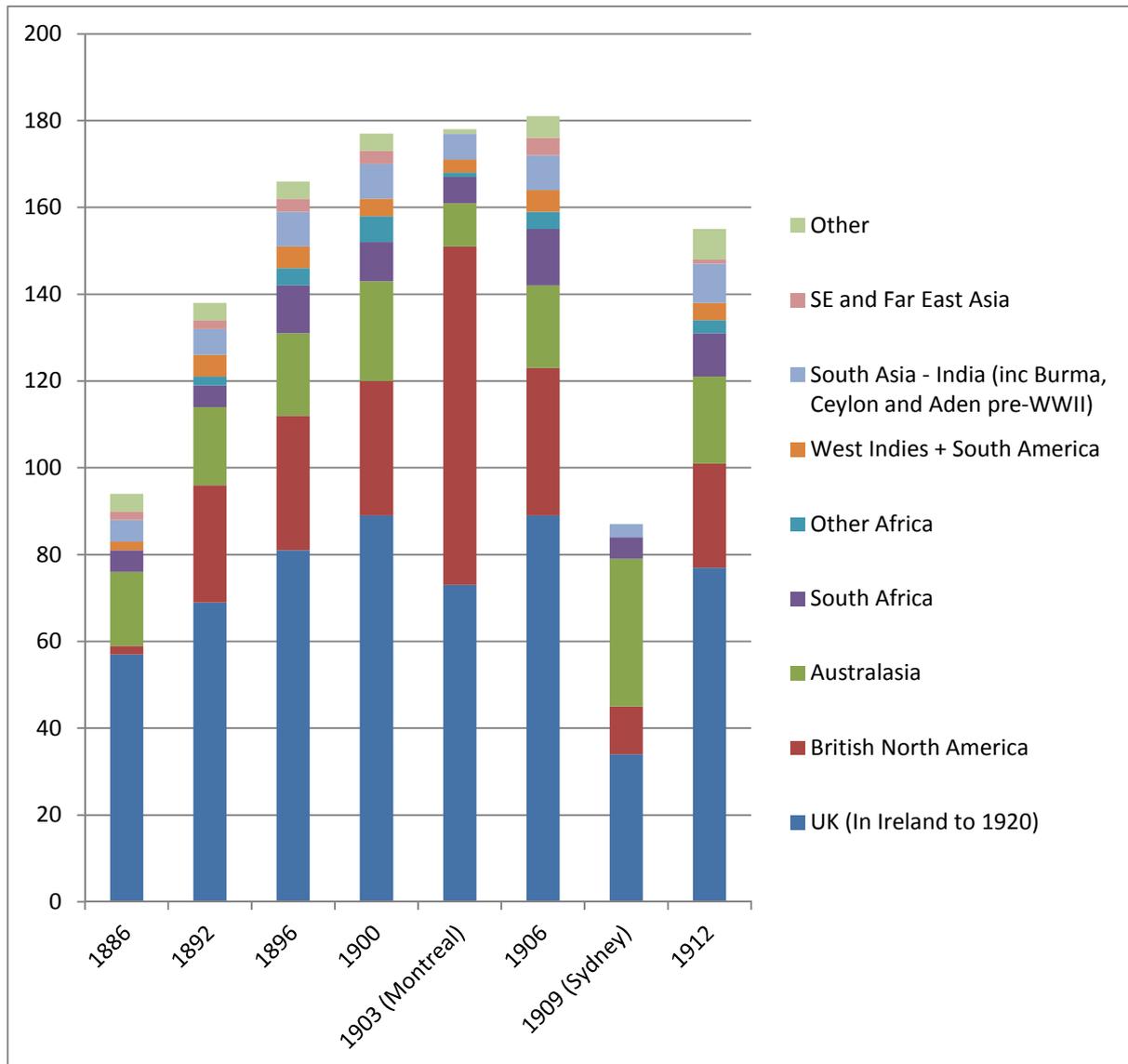
⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

⁷ *Morning Post*, 12 July 1886.

⁸ London Metropolitan Archive (LMA hereafter), 'Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce', Catalogue Description, Available from <http://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/LMA?LOGONFORM> [Consulted 7 Feb 2013]

involved between 1886 and 1914. The largest numbers came from Britain, closely followed by representatives from the settler colonies. Fewer delegates (all of them white expatriates) ‘represented’ the dependent empire.

Figure 2: Breakdown of Participant Chambers, 1886-1914



Sources: *Chambers of Commerce Journal Supplements*, Aug 1886, p. 1, Aug 1892, p. 1-2, Aug. 1896, p. 1-2; London Metropolitan Archive CLC/B/082/MS18287/1-2 (Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce Papers): Reports of Proceedings at Congresses, 1900-1909, 1911.

London retained significant control of the organization down to 1914. Until 1910, the Congress was organised by a ‘Congress Organising Committee’ composed of leading figures of the London Chamber of Commerce and the agents-general and high commissioners. All important decisions until 1910 were referred to the London Chamber’s Council (its central

governing body). More importantly, London controlled the form of the debates, the voting powers of delegates, and co-ordinated subsequent lobbying activities.⁹ Every Congress from 1886 to 1912 had a member of the London Chamber of Commerce as its President. In 1911, the London Chamber's Congress Organising Committee was re-constituted as a separate permanent organisation, the British Imperial Council of Commerce. The old Congress Organising Committee formed the nucleus of the new organisation.¹⁰ Yet London's control was not complete, especially on the floor of the Congress. For instance, a staccato minute on 15 December 1885 recorded 'Tariffs – feeling against discussion' but the 1886 debate repeatedly drifted into tariff policy, not least through interventions by Canadian High Commissioner Charles Tupper and his predecessor, Alexander Galt.¹¹ Canadians were particularly active contributors. Indeed, in 1906 Walter James, agent-general of Western Australia (the state's representative in London), complained that the 'great bulk of work was brought forward by Canada' and jibbed that the 'Niagara-like flow of Canadian eloquence... was a striking testimony to the extent to which these good people had been Americanised'.¹²

Contemporaries accorded the Congress high status. The secretary of state for the colonies, Lord Knutsford, flattered the second Congress in 1892 by telling it that it was of 'no less importance than the first Colonial Conference of 1887'.¹³ In 1910, the Birmingham historical economist, W. J. Ashley, described it as the 'non-official commercial parliament of the empire'.¹⁴ Leading politicians participated in proceedings including Joseph Chamberlain and three prime ministers: Wilfred Laurier (Canada), Alfred Deakin (Australia), and Herbert Asquith (UK). From 1892, eminent aristocrats, ministers, City-men, the agents-general and high commissioners acted as honorary vice-presidents. In 1896 Joseph Chamberlain became the Congresses first honorary president. He used his opening speech to advocate an imperial Zollverein for a second time in public, and spoke again in similar vein at the closing banquet.¹⁵ Subsequent honorary presidents included Lord Selborne (Undersecretary to the Colonies) in 1900; Lord Strathcona (Canadian

⁹ LMA: CLC/B/150/16459/ (London Chamber of Commerce Council Minute Books, LCCMB hereafter) 001/227, 230: 'Council Meeting', 12 April 1892, 12 May 1892; Ibid. 002/22: 'Council Meeting', 14 Nov 1895; Ibid. 003/001/425, 436: 'Council Meeting', 14 June 1906, 5 July 1906. Even when the Congress was held overseas the London chamber retained overall control of proceedings. See *ibid.* 003/01/93, 106, 152: 'Council Meeting', 12 Mar. 1903, 2 Apr. 1903, 8 Oct. 1903

¹⁰ LCCMB 004/002/361: 'Council Minutes', 8 Feb. 1910. 'An abiding bureau had been first suggested by a member of the London Chamber in 1900. See *ibid.*, CLC/B/150/16459/002/278: 'Council Minutes', 14 June 1900.

¹¹ LMA: CLC/B/150/MS16466/2 (London Chambers of Commerce Papers): 'Organising Committee', *Rough Minute Book*, 15 Dec 1885; *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, Aug. 1886, pp. 12-16.

¹² Mitchell Library, Sydney, Walter James Letterbooks, MSS412/5/277, 315: James to Chamber of Commerce of Freemantle, 13 July 1906; James to Waxman, 3 Aug. 1906.

¹³ *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, Aug. 1892, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ashley, 'Introduction', pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁵ *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, 1896, pp. 4-6, 100-102.

High Commissioner) in Montreal in 1903; Earl of Elgin and Kincardine (Colonial Secretary), 1906; Earl of Dudley (Governor-General of Australia), 1909. In 1912 the British Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, was persuaded to undertake the role.¹⁶ The Congress also enjoyed royal approval. In 1886, the Prince of Wales had granted the first Congress leave to use the premises of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition and in 1896 he attended the Congress's banquet.¹⁷ In 1906, as King Edward, he received a deputation of delegates. In 1912, 600 delegates and their ladies were entertained at the Buckingham Palace.¹⁸ Thus by the outbreak of the Great War, the Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire had established itself as a leading unofficial institution of empire.

2) *The Historiographical Significance of the Congress*

Despite its sheer scale, scope, status and longevity, the existence of the Congress has barely registered in the literature. It attracted only passing references in the work of W. G. Hynes, S. B. R. Smith, and Lance Davis and Ronald Huttenback on the economics of empire.¹⁹ The older literature on the evolution of the Commonwealth ignored it favouring the study of evolving intergovernmental relations.²⁰ Even W. D. McIntyre's work on the non-governmental institutions of the Commonwealth makes no mention of the Congress.²¹ More recently, the Congress has attracted a passing attention in Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson's *Empire and Globalisation*, and in my own work.²² None of these works explores the purpose of the Congress in any detail. The contention here is that the Congress was existed to undertake lobbying (particularly of the imperial government) and hence to shape the framework of imperial political economy; its role in forming networks was ancillary to its purpose.

If this contention holds, then the Congress fails to fit the main paradigms through which Britain's relations with the settlement empire have been understood since the Second World War. Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher's seminal article on 'The Imperialism of Free Trade'

¹⁶ *Chambers of Commerce Journal Supplement, June 1896*, p. 1; LMA CLC/B/082/MS18287/001 (Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce Papers, Reports of Proceedings at Congresses, 1900-1909): *Official Report of the Forth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, 26-29 June 1900 (*Official Report*, 1900 hereafter), p. 1; *Official Report of the Fifth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, 17-21 August 1903 (*Official Report*, 1903 hereafter), p. 2; *Official Report of the Proceeding at the Sixth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, 10-12 July 1906, p. 1 (*Official Report*, 1906 hereafter); *Official Report of the Proceeding at the Seventh Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, 14-17 September 1909, p. 1 (*Official Report*, 1909 hereafter); LMA CLC/B/082/MS18287/002: *Official Report of the Proceedings at the Eight Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, 11-14 June 1912, p.2 (*Official Report*, 1912 hereafter).

¹⁷ 'The Court', *The Graphic*, 13 June 1896.

¹⁸ *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs*, 1907, p. 621; *Official Report*, 1912, p. 82.

¹⁹ Davis and Huttenback, *Mammon*, pp. 256-259; Hynes, *Economics of empire*; Smith, 'British Nationalism', pp. 250-256.

²⁰ Hancock, *Problems of Economic Policy*; Hancock, *Problems of Nationality*; Mansergh, *The Commonwealth experience*; Miller, *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs*; McIntyre, *Commonwealth of Nations*.

²¹ McIntyre, *Significance of the Commonwealth*.

²² Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*; Dilley, *Finance, Politics, and Imperialism*.

alluded to both approaches. That article summarily dismissed constitutional understandings of empire (and set a trend that marginalised the study of the empire and Commonwealth as a political entity).²³ The self-governing colonies were important to this shift – highlighting that even within the empire, informal means of control could be sufficient for British interests. Hence Robinson and Gallagher argued that after the concession of responsible government (internal autonomy) to the settler colonies, 'it was possible to rely on economic dependence and mutual good feeling to keep the colonies bound to Britain'.²⁴ This encapsulates the two main ways in which anglo-dominion relations have been understood by historians of British imperialism subsequently: either as a peculiar form of economic dependence (a form of informal empire) or as a socio-cultural phenomenon (a 'British world'). Gallagher and particularly Robinson emphasised the first approach. Thus Robinson, outlining the crux of their (relatively cursory) analysis, wrote that 'collaborative bargains proved easy to make and keep when commercial partnership was mutually profitable and colonists were permitted to manage their own affairs'; and that 'the real motor of the process [lay] in the meshing of autonomous private enterprises with the internal politics of quasi-autonomous governments'.²⁵ Important elements of Robinson and Gallagher's approach carried over into P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins' fuller account of British imperialism which emphasised the role of finance in cementing anglo-dominion relations. For them, like Robinson, British imperialism in the dominions was primarily a process of informal imperialism. Dependence on British capital cemented what Cain and Hopkins call 'structural power' and dominion adherence to the 'rules of the financial game'.²⁶ Subsequent debate has focused on the interface of London finance and dominion politics and the degree to which this interface can be understood as a form of informal imperialism.²⁷ Commerce, never central in Cain and Hopkins account, has not attracted the same attention. The approach provided little conceptual space for imperial governance to play a continued and significant role after responsible government had been conceded.

Robinson and Gallagher alluded to, but never developed, their second observation: that 'mutual good feeling' as well as mutual self-interest and economic might play an important role in anglo-dominion relations. This has become a major contention that in the second major strand of the literature to emerge in recent years: the British world. Here the emphasis has been

²³ Gallagher and Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', pp. 2-3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁵ Robinson, 'Non-European foundations', p. 124; Robinson, 'Excentric Idea of Imperialism', p. 274.

²⁶ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, pp. 205-240; Cain and Hopkins, 'Theory and Practice', pp. 202-210.

²⁷ For several recent contributions, see Attard, 'Free-trade Imperialism to Structural Power'; Attard, 'Bridgeheads, 'Colonial Places' and the Queensland Financial Crisis of 1866'; Dilley, *Finance, Politics, and Imperialism*; Attard and Dilley, eds., *Finance, Empire and the British World*.

on what Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich 'globalisation from below' based on dense transnational social networks and 'cultural glue' holding together a (somewhat ill defined) entity.²⁸ Writers on the British world including Phillip Buckner as well as Bridge and Fedorowich situate themselves in opposition to the use of models of collaboration and dependence to explain relations between different elements of that world. Yet the British world literature shares with both Robinson and Gallagher, and Cain and Hopkins, a tendency to de-emphasise the political and constitutional elements of the relationships between Britain and the settlement empire. This characterises Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson's *Empire and Globalisation* offers an economic analysis based on the British world framework. Magee and Thompson argue that the dense networks, information flows, and (to a lesser degree) shared culture of the British world created a 'cultural economy' based on shared identity, dense information flows and 'co-ethnic networks' which became a particularly intensely integrated segment of the late-nineteenth century global economy.²⁹ Overall they conclude with regard to trade that, 'the empire was not an active ingredient in economic policy-making, but neither did the British state eschew any role whatsoever in promoting imperial trade'.³⁰ They generally downplay (though do not dismiss) the role of institutions and regulations in shaping this cultural economy.³¹

The Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire presents something of a paradox for both of the Robinson and Gallagher/Cain and Hopkins and the British world approaches. As a formal association bringing together leading businessmen from across the empire for nearly 90 years, with royal approval, and other indicators of high status, the previous neglect of its activities cannot be read as an indicator of its insignificance. The argument presented in this paper is that the Congress can only be understood if its professed purpose – to formulate common positions on matters of imperial political economy and lobby the UK government in particular on that basis – is taken seriously. Recognising this requires some revision of both of the main paradigms through which anglo-dominion relations have been understood. Put succinctly, politics and governance needs to be brought back into the analytical frame. Other scholars have also begun to rediscover the political and institutional life of the British world. It can be glimpsed in Andrew Thompson's early work on imperial pressure groups in Britain; in Simon Potter's work on the imperial press and Canadian reciprocity; in my own and Andrew Smith's examinations of the importance for institutional and legal frameworks for

²⁸ Bridge and Fedorowich, 'The British world'. See also Buckner and Francis, eds., *Rediscovering the British world*; Darian-Smith, Grimshaw, and Macintyre, *Britishness abroad*.

²⁹ Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14.

investors; in Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine's emphasis on the ways in which political frameworks shaped patterns of migration; in Marc William Palen's demonstration of the ways in which the US Dingley Tariff precipitated new drives towards commercial integration between Britain and the dominions; or in Duncan Bell's re-examination of the powerful body of Victorian thinking on 'Greater Britain' which provided the Congress's empire with its particular intellectual backdrop.³² Such a political life highlights the persistence and relevance of an imperial polity that stretched beyond and below the realm of inter-governmental relations and long into the era of responsible government. It also echoes Frederick Cooper's argument that empires are in the end defined by a collective political imaginary (thinking like an empire), and should be analysed in this light.³³

The remainder of this paper examines the underlying dynamics of the Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire, seeking to demonstrate the centrality of its discussions of political economy and its aspirations to shape policy, and through this to highlight the centrality of the political imaginary within which imperial commerce operated. First the paper examines the Congress through an alternative prism: Magee and Thompson's model of the 'cultural economy', examining the Congress's networking activities and as a vehicle for disseminating commercial information. The Congress undoubtedly acted in both capacities but neither offers a sufficient explanation of the form or persistence of the Congress. There were other and better means to form networks.³⁴ The second section of the paper provides an overview of the Congress's debates arguing that the central purpose of the Congress (in the eyes of its participants) was to shape the framework of political economy within which imperial commerce operated. Crucially while contemporaries recognised the networking potential and cultural aspects of the Congress, its role as a vehicle to influence policy was repeatedly emphasised. The significance of this is rehearsed by way of conclusion.

3) *Trade in the Late-Victorian and Edwardian Empire: Some Trends*

The Congress emerged against the backdrop of some complex shifts in world trade in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Magee and Thompson have recently confirmed D. C. M. Platt's older observation that during this period British trade with imperial and particular dominion markets proved more dynamic (i.e. grew faster) than trade with the foreign

³² Thompson, *Imperial Britain*; Potter, *News and the British world*; Potter, 'Imperial Significance'; Smith, 'Patriotism'; Dilley, *Finance, Politics, and Imperialism*; Harper and Constantine, *Migration and empire*; Palen, 'Protection, Federation and Union'; Bell, *Idea of greater Britain*.

³³ Cooper, *Colonialism in question*, pp. 200-203.

³⁴ The role of cultures of imperial Britishness in the Congress are not discussed owing to constraints of space. Such cultures certainly pervaded the conference. However, notwithstanding the co-incidence of its birth with the 1880s imperial federation movement, the evidence here is sufficient to demonstrate that the Congress was not designed and sustained as a vehicle to perpetuate that culture.

sector.³⁵ Table 1 summarises the key trends across the period 1886-1913 in the commerce of Britain, Australia, and Canada (the main players at the congresses).

Table 1: Trends in Anglo-Dominion Economic Relations, 1886-1913 (averages)

	Britain		Australia (c)		Canada (d)	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
<i>Portion of Trade with the Foreign Sector (b)</i>						
1886-1900 (c)	77.66%	66.14%	19.52%	24.10%	47.55%	37.37%
1901-1913 (e)	76.78%	64.49%	39.90%	41.51%	60.18%	40.28%
Average 1886-1913 (c,e)	77.22%	65.32%	29.33%	32.48%	53.87%	38.83%
<i>Proportion with the rest of the Empire (a)</i>						
1886-1900 (c)	22.34%	33.86%	80.48%	75.90%	38.44%	55.00%
1901-1913 (e)	23.22%	35.51%	60.10%	58.49%	28.23%	56.72%
Average 1886-1913 (c,e)	22.78%	34.68%	70.67%	67.52%	33.33%	55.86%
<i>Proportion of Trade with Dominions/Britain</i>						
1886-1900 (c)	10.70%	15.60%	68.74%	68.63%	36.52%	51.01%
1901-1913 (e)	12.00%	16.12%	53.29%	49.71%	24.25%	51.59%
Average 1886-1913 (c,e)	11.35%	15.86%	61.30%	59.52%	30.38%	51.30%
<i>Average Annual Growth in Trade with Empire</i>						
1886-1900 (c)	1.51%	1.55%	2.27%	3.78%	-1.31%	6.01%
1901-1913 (e)	4.75%	5.96%	3.40%	3.49%	11.18%	6.36%
Average 1886-1913 (c,e)	3.21%	2.43%	2.84%	3.64%	6.19%	6.22%
<i>Average Annual Growth in Trade with Britain/Dominions</i>						
1886-1900 (c)	3.02%	2.41%	2.23%	3.26%	-1.37%	6.27%
1901-1913 (e)	4.26%	5.63%	3.93%	4.35%	10.01%	5.87%
Average 1886-1913 (c,e)	3.79%	3.20%	3.08%	3.81%	5.46%	6.03%
<i>Average Annual Growth in Trade with the Foreign Sector (b)</i>						
1886-1900 (c)	2.47%	2.78%	9.90%	13.68%	2.48%	1.18%
1901-1913 (e)	2.67%	4.44%	8.90%	8.37%	14.63%	8.42%
Average 1886-1913 (c,e)	2.62%	2.55%	9.40%	11.02%	9.77%	5.52%
<i>Average Annual Growth in All Trade</i>						
1886-1900 (c)	2.25%	2.27%	3.69%	5.83%	1.04%	3.77%
1901-1913 (e)	3.10%	4.89%	4.71%	5.22%	12.57%	7.35%
Average 1886-1913 (c,e)	2.73%	2.50%	4.20%	5.53%	7.96%	5.92%

Notes: (a) - Australian Data for New Zealand, Canada, and India after 1901; includes Britain for Australia and Canada; (b) US Only for Canada; (c) Australian data begins in 1887; (d) Canadian data based on 5 yearly snapshots for 1886, 1891, 1896, 1901, 1906, 1911; (e) Canadian Data ends 1911; (f) The difference between the average annual change in that area and the average annual change of all imports/exports.

Sources: Schlote, W., *British Overseas Trade from 1700 to the 1930s* (Oxford, 1952), tables 4-6, 20b; Vamplew, W., ed., *Australians: Historical Statistics* (Broadway, N.S.W, 1987), series 67-80, 152-166, pp. 189, 196; Leacy, F. H., *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Ottawa, 1983), series G381-388.

The British data bear out Magee and Thompson's arguments. While the empire provided just under a quarter of British imports, and received about a third of British exports, the proportions

³⁵ Magee, 'Importance of Being British?'; Thompson and Magee, 'A soft touch?'

of trade flowing into imperial channels also expanded by just over 1% of both imports and exports when the periods 1886-1900 and 1901-1913 are compared. In the period 1901-1913 51% of Britain's imports came from the empire, and 45 percent of exports went to the empire. Moreover, the annual average growth of dominion markets exceeded either foreign trade or empire as a whole trade across the period. However, during the Edwardian period, the growth of imports and exports to and from the Empire as a whole marginally outpaced the dominions alone, indicating higher growth in trade with the dependent empire. Overall then, the dominions in particular, and the empire more generally were becoming an increasingly important market for British traders.

The Canadian and Australian experience did not exactly mirror that of their British counterparts. Although the empire became increasingly important for the British, the foreign sector played increasingly important roles in Australian and Canadian trade.³⁶ However, the overall portions of trade with Britain were far greater in the Canadian and Australian cases. Through the period, the Empire as a whole always took an absolute majority of Australian imports and exports. Nonetheless, the proportions declined markedly in the Edwardian period, and Britain ceased to take an absolute majority of the Commonwealth's exports. The growth of Australia's trade with the foreign sector outpaced its imperial and British trading connections. This reflects a diversification of the Australian economy in the wake of the 1890s depression and the acquisition of new markets for Australian wool in continental Europe.³⁷

Canada presents a different picture again. The proportions of Canadian exports to the empire held firm at just over half across the period while the proportion of Canadian imports from the rest of the empire (chiefly from Britain) declined. However, the Canadian experience was very different before and after 1896. In the 1880s and 1890s the Canadian economy entered the doldrums.³⁸ In this period, British markets provided the most rapidly growing market for Canadian exports, and still provided an average of 38% of imports. Thereafter, Edwardian Canada underwent an explosive boom driven by inward investment, industrialisation, population expansion, the settlement of the prairies, and the exploitation of other raw materials.³⁹ As a result overall Canadian trade grew dramatically (from 1901-1913 at an average annual rate of 12.57% for imports and 7.35% for exports) reflecting both the dramatic inward investment from Britain and the US, and the dominion's burgeoning output. Yet Canada's voracious search for new

³⁶ In the context of an increasingly complex and interlocking pattern of international payments, see Saul, *Studies in British Overseas Trade*, pp. 43-63.

³⁷ Meredith and Dyster, *Australia in the global economy*, pp. 59-69.

³⁸ This picture has been confirmed by Urquhart's recent work on Canadian GDP. See Urquhart, 'New Estimates'

³⁹ Bothwell, Drummond, and English, *Canada*, pp. 55-83.

markets in the period led total trade to grow faster than trade with Britain, with the empire, and with the US. Booming Canada's imports and exports grew so dramatically, and diversified enough that even a colossal average annual expansion of 10% of imports from and 5.87% of exports to Britain (and slightly higher figures for the empire as a whole) failed to keep pace with the overall trend. This should not mask the continued importance of imperial trade, particularly with Britain.

Overall then, imperial markets were not the fastest growing for either Australia or Canada, but the overall volume of trade (imports and exports for Australia, and exports for Canada) made them a significant proportion of the whole. Moreover, Australian and (in the Edwardian period particularly) Canadian governments and businessmen were looking not only to generate trade but also to attract inward investment and migrants, and the primary source of men and money remained Britain.⁴⁰ Thus commercial and investment dynamics within the empire provided incentives for businessmen to seek to form networks *or* to seek to shape the regulatory framework governing inter-imperial economic transactions. Which of these two possibilities dominated and drove the Congress?

4) *A Crucible for 'Co-ethnic networks'?*

What role then did the goal of forging networks and sharing information play in the operation of the Congress, and how central were these activities to its success? Magee and Thompson argue that what they call 'co-ethnic networks' facilitated the development of economic connections in the British World, and they, and I, have argued that the Congress contributed to this process.⁴¹ Certainly networking formed one element of the professed purpose of the Congress. The *Chamber of Commerce Journal* wrote approvingly that the Congress would, 'afford opportunities to those engaged in commerce to become personally acquainted with the internal resources of the empire and with each other, thus tending to strengthen the bonds of unity'.⁴² It is likely that individual networks were formed during the Congress although evidence of this beyond assertions by the *Chamber of Commerce Journal* is hard to verify.⁴³ Nonetheless, there were other (and indeed more efficient) means of making individual contacts than sitting listening in silence for two days to Canadians making speeches on tariff reform. Walter James (something

⁴⁰ Dilley, *Finance, Politics, and Imperialism*, p. 2-3.

⁴¹ Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 147; Dilley, *Finance, Politics, and Imperialism*, pp. 99-101.

⁴² *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, June 1903, p. 1

⁴³ *Ibid.*, July 1906, p. 155; Jan. 1909, p. 4.

of a sceptic as to the worth of the Congress) considered the 1906 CCCE 'too large in numbers for delegates to become personally acquainted'.⁴⁴

The Congress was probably effective as a vehicle for promoting whole regions when the Congress travelled overseas, to Montreal in 1903 and Sydney in 1909. This relocation was initiated by the Montreal Board of Trade, and supported by a Canadian government grant. Advertising Canada's expanding economy was an important factor.⁴⁵ Great efforts were expended to present the delegates with a positive and comprehensive overview of Canadian resources. Delegates enjoyed free rail and steamship passage in the dominion, could join organised tours of the Maritimes and the West, and received copies of the *Handbook of Canada* and *Statistical Yearbook of the Dominion*. The Montreal Board of Trade also produced lantern slides for distribution in Britain.⁴⁶ Self-promotion also underlay the invitation of the Congress to Sydney in 1909, which the president of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce predicted would be a 'splendid advertisement for Australia' (which then had a generally poor image in British financial and commercial circles).⁴⁷ Again, discounted travel and elaborate tours were laid on for delegates.⁴⁸ The vice-president of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of the Commonwealth of Australia judged that the 'each delegate delegates' had been gone home, 'deeply impressed with the unbounded possibilities of this vast continent', subsequently becoming 'an advertising agent' disseminating 'very satisfactory information ... with regard to the position of Australia'.⁴⁹

Commercial networking was clearly an element sustaining the Congress, and promoting particular regions more generally provided one motive for dominion participation when the Congress travelled abroad. Yet most Congresses were held in London. While the CCCE certainly contributed to networking, this was not its primary role. The first Congress was held in 1886 to coincide with the Colonial and Indian Exhibition precisely because businessmen from across the empire would *already* be present and mingling with British businessmen in the context of the exhibition. Such exhibitions, along with individual contacts, organised tours, and other methods

⁴⁴ Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS412/5/277, 315 (Walter James Letterbooks): James to Chamber of Commerce of Freemantle, 13 July 1906.

⁴⁵ Archives Canada, Wilfred Laurier Papers, MG/26/G792/226/63545: Fielding to Laurier, 10 March 1902.

⁴⁶ *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, 1903, p. 266; *Official Report, 1903*, p. 151, LCCMB, 002/159, 183: 'Council Minutes', 12 Nov. 1903, 14 Jan. 1904.

⁴⁷ Public Library of Victoria. MS 10917/I (Melbourne Chamber of Commerce Minute Books), 25 June 1908. For similar comments see, State Record Office of Western Australia, 1150/298/18 (Agents-General Papers): R. C. Hare, *Annual Report on 1907-8*, 1 Feb 1909. On Australia's image problems see Dilley, *Finance, Politics, and Imperialism*, Ch. 4.

⁴⁸ *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, Mar. 1909, p. 65; *Ibid.* Oct. 1909, p. 10

⁴⁹ Mitchell Library, MSS 5706/6(11) (Associated Chambers of Commerce of the Commonwealth of Australia Papers): 'Minutes of the 8th Meeting of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of the Commonwealth of Australia', 1910, p. 12. Certainly Australia won a powerful friend in the City in Albert Spicer. See *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, Jan. 1910, p. 4-7; Spicer, 'Australia'

were probably more effective than the Congress as crucibles of business connections.⁵⁰ Networking and information flows are not sufficient to explain the existence and persistence of the Congress. We might, then, join one Torontonian delegate (W. F. Cockshutt) who, asked delegates at the 1896 CCCE, 'who have spent their time and money in attending these Congresses, What have been the practical result of these meetings? (Hear, Hear)',⁵¹

5) *Towards a pan-Imperial Political Economy*

When in 1896 Cockshutt asked what the practical results of the congresses had been, he did so in the midst of a heated debate on tariffs. The considerable time and expense that the congresses involved suggest that we should take its discussions seriously. The outcomes of these debates mattered. The London chamber debated its position on Congress resolutions in depth in its governing council as well as moving resolutions of its own. Press reportage on the Southampton and Birmingham chambers in the 1890s suggest that it was by no means uniquely diligent.⁵² Overseas chambers were equally serious. As Cockshutt put it, 'We do not come across the Atlantic to spend large sums of money and time on purpose to attend these meetings without being in earnest with regard to these matters'.⁵³ In other words, the Congress of the Chambers of Commerce of the Empire ultimately existed to discuss and affect the policy framework within which commerce around the empire operated.

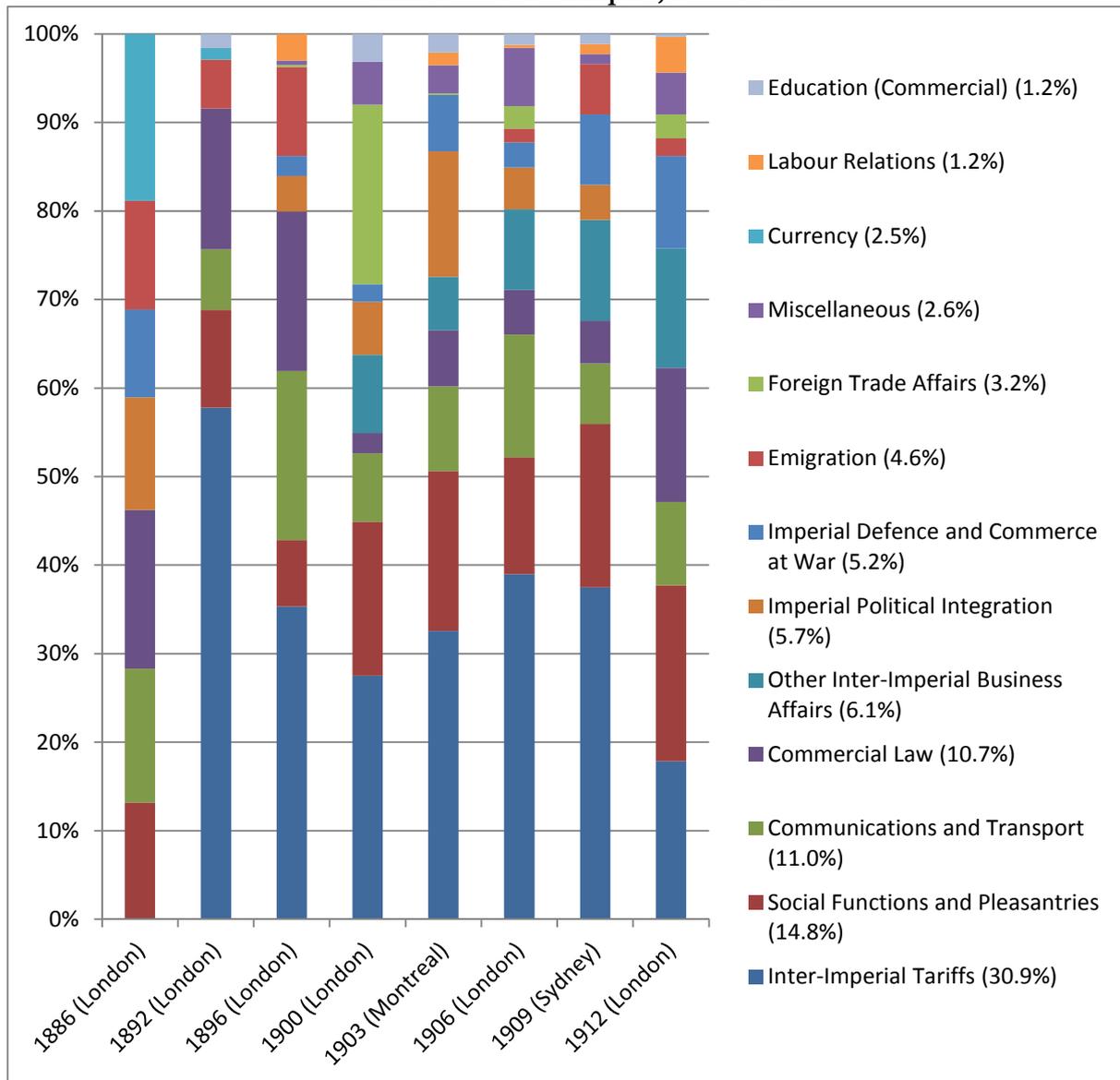
⁵⁰ Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, pp. 133-154.

⁵¹ *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement* July 1896, p. 15.

⁵² See for example: LCCMB, CLC/B/150/16459/001/239: Council Meeting 14 July 1892; Ibid., 002/24, 271: 'Council meeting', 4 June 1896, 10 May 1900; 003/001/106-8: 'Minutes of Joint Conference of the Council and Organising Committee of the Fifth CCCE and the New York delegation', 30 April 1903; Ibid. 003/002/429-432: 'Special Committee on the Resolutions of the Sixth CCCE', 5 July 1906; Ibid. 004/001/225, 235-238: 'Special Council Minutes', 7 June 1909, Council Minutes, 8 July 1909; Ibid. 005/001/71-2, 89-90: Council Minutes, 14 Mar. 1912, 9 May 1912. See for example, 'Birmingham Chamber of Commerce', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 29 Jan 1892;

⁵³ *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, 9-12 June 1896, p. 15.

Figure 3: Estimates of Time devoted to debates at the Congresses of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire, 1886-1912



Sources: *Official Reports*. The estimates are based on the space taken up in the verbatim minutes on various resolutions, classified under the headings used in the chart.

What commercial topics made sense to discuss in an imperial context? It is not possible to reproduce in detail the debates of the eight congresses held before the First World War. However, the chart below provides a digest of the topics of debate. Broadly, the congress focused either on fine-grained matters specific to commerce (regulation, lighthouse charges, commercial education, commercial law), or broader principles of imperial political economy (commercial preference, defence, political integration). The significance of the regulatory detail

should not be underestimated.⁵⁴ At the first congress for example a good deal of discussion was devoted to Bills of Lading – the contracts between merchants and shippers for the carriage of goods. The issue turned on who carried the risk of damage to goods, particularly at the point of loading or unloading, and the congress resolved (after some protest by shipping interests) to seek more generous terms for merchants.⁵⁵ This was the kind of legislation which self-governing colonies often copied verbatim from the imperial government.⁵⁶ A common position combined with effective lobbying had clear advantages in this context.

The congress devoted a good deal of time to broader pan-imperial matters.⁵⁷ Of these, tariff policy occupied the largest proportion of proceedings, peaking at over 50% in 1892, and averaging at least 30% through the period, reflecting the issue's importance, and the deeper political and economic difficulties of either a reversal of dominion protectionism, or British adherence to Free Trade. The congress was probably the most public pan-imperial forum in which the tariff reform debate played out. From 1886 through to 1909, Canadians were instrumental in pushing preferential trade. *The Economist* thought the Canadian stand was driven by the 1891 US McKinley Tariff which led to fears of 'political absorption' as well as a sense of economic vulnerability.⁵⁸ From the 1892 CCCE onwards the London Chamber brokered a series of compromises, which slowly shifted more towards tariff reform. In 1892, the congress resolved to call for the abrogation of treaties obstructing imperial commercial integration on the 'freest possible basis'.⁵⁹ In 1896, a call for an imperial conference on the matter was sent to the British prime minister, the colonial secretary, and the high commissioners and agents-general.⁶⁰ The 1900 congress passed a similar motion.⁶¹ In 1903, amidst Chamberlain's Tariff Reform Campaign, the Montreal congress called for a commercial policy based on 'the principles of mutual benefit' which (according to the *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs*) was 'assumed to be an endosation [sic] of Mr Chamberlain'.⁶² At 1906, Toronto again led the charge for preference, and that congress passed a resolution calling for preferential treatment, by a vote of 105 to 41 with 22 abstaining.⁶³ At Sydney in 1909, with the London Chamber (which converted

⁵⁴ A point made by Magee and Thompson who do not draw out the implications: if regulation matters, so too does political economy, and hence the institutional and political framework within which commerce operates. See Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ See the debate at the 1886 Congress, *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, 5 Aug. 1886, pp. 42-49.

⁵⁶ Smith, 'Patriotism', pp. 66-71; Girard, 'British Justice'

⁵⁷ Contrary to Magee and Thompson's reading. See Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 147.

⁵⁸ *The Economist*, 2 June 1892, p. 852. See also Palen, 'Protection, Federation and Union'.

⁵⁹ *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, 14 July 1892, get pp.

⁶⁰ *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, 9-12 June 1896, p. 44.

⁶¹ *Official Report, 1900*, p. 34.

⁶² *Canadian Annual Review*, (1904), p. 322. The *Canadian Annual Review* acted as a mouthpiece for Canada's economic and political elites.

⁶³ *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, July 1906, p. 43-4; *Official Report*, 1906, p. 25, 37, 47.

to Tariff Reform in 1907) leading, the Congress passed a resolution for 'preferential treatment on a reciprocal basis' by 65 for to 9 against and 17 abstaining.⁶⁴

Thus, when Walter James complained of the barrage of Canadian speeches in favour of tariff reform, however tedious, he revealed something fundamental: delegates came not only to mingle but to persuade. Those who made speeches did so in the expectation (or at least hope) that their views would carry weight.⁶⁵ The 1909 Sydney congress's president (and president of the London Chamber of Commerce), Albert Spicer, emphasised precisely this point when opening that congress, suggesting that its predecessors had 'done something in moulding opinion, spurring on administrative action, and stimulating legislation, thus leaving our impress upon the policies of both Home and Dominion governments'. He listed three pages of supposed achievements across a range of fields, including: the development of colonial conferences and imperial integration; tariff reform (where the Congress had at least thrown 'fresh light' on the subject); commercial law; imperial transport and communications (for instance the 1898 Imperial Penny post); International arbitration; arbitration and conciliation in industrial disputes; and commercial education. Given this record, Spicer expressed confidence in the CCCE's future ability to 'mould opinion and lay the basis of future legislation'.⁶⁶ After the Sydney congress, the foundation of the British Imperial Council of Commerce in 1911 was intended to allow 'the work would continue without intermission from one Congress to another' and for the congresses resolutions to be 'sent to the different governing departments with persistency'.⁶⁷

In short, the Congress aspired to (and believed it could) shape the framework of imperial political economy. This point is not dependent on its actual impact on policy. It is the belief that the policy framework was important and worth lobbying that is so revealing about both the interactions of commerce and empire, and the nature of the empire at this time. The congress reflected a belief that a meaningful pan-imperial political framework – a single political entity – existed and mattered. Moreover, the congress was founded in the expectation that imperial integration would increase with important economic repercussions. Thus the *Chamber of Commerce Journal* justified the 1886 CCCE in part on the grounds that imperial federation would become, 'the great factor in the industrial future of the British Empire.'⁶⁸ The Congress consistently called

⁶⁴ *Official Report*, 1909, p. 14-21, 47

⁶⁵ The London Chamber lobbied on the basis of Congress resolutions. See for example 'Merchandise Marks in the Colonies', *Glasgow Herald*, 2 Nov 1892; *Morning Post*, 30 Nov 1892, p. 4; LCCMB, CLC/B/150/16459/002/370: Council Meeting, 10 Oct 1901; *Ibid.*, LCCMB CLC/B/150/16459/004/001: Council Meeting, 14 Feb 1907.

⁶⁶ *Official Report*, 1909, p. 12-13.

⁶⁷ LMA CLC/B/082/ MS18283/001 (Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce Papers, Minute Books): Albert Spicer's comments, 'Report of Proceedings of the Inaugural Meeting', *British Imperial Council of Commerce Minute Book*, 5 July 1911, p. 3

⁶⁸ *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, June 1886, p. 127.

for further integration, starting in 1886 with a call that 'members of Her Majesty's Government ... for the purpose of requesting that the colonial governments be at once consulted by the home government as to the best means of carrying out some efficient scheme of imperial federation'.⁶⁹ A year later, the first Colonial Conference (meeting of the British government and the premiers of the self-governing colonies) took place. By the Edwardian period, the CCCE often flattered itself that it had influenced the development those Colonial Conferences.⁷⁰ Whatever the truth of that claim⁷¹, it made sense for a pan-imperial lobbying organisation to seek to strengthen the central institutions of the empire which it sought to lobby, albeit in ways compatible with responsible government. Neither the vagaries of informal empire nor the platitudes of the cultural economy were sufficient it seems to guarantee the interests of commerce.

7) Conclusion

The Congress embodied and indeed forged a commercial community of self-interest.⁷² That interest was, at core political – the Congress was conceived and designed to formulate common positions and lobby on matters of pan-imperial political economy – either by engaging on matters of detail, or through collective interventions in political discourse. Growing British trade with the dominions and the large portions for dominion trade conducted with Britain provided commercial elites with powerful incentives to seek to unify and shape the framework of political economy within which they operated. They had good reasons to agree positions in order to reformulate tariff policy, codify commercial law, ensure adequate defence, promote commercial education, or tackle technical matters such as bills of lading. Networking and the promotion of information flows – the processes at the heart of Magee and Thompson's model of the cultural economy – certainly took place within the Congress, but they were not, in the end its *raison d'être*.

It is the essentially political nature of the Congress, and the focus of its activities on shaping pan-imperial political economy, that poses a challenge for the paradigms which have dominated historical understanding of relations between the settler colonies and Britain. An organisation focused on lobbying the imperial centre was not geared towards the creation of

⁶⁹ *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, Aug. 1886, p. 19.

⁷⁰ See for example Lord Strathcona's comments in *Official Report*, 1903, p. 10; and Spicer's speech in 1909, *Official Report*, 1909, p. 12.

⁷¹ The claim requires further research but should not be entirely discounted. The CCCE was the closest unofficial equivalent of the Conferences and anticipated their development into a formal and *regular* consultative mechanism between representatives of Britain and the empire.

⁷² For the use of this term, see Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian Identity'; Ward, 'Sentiment and Self-Interest'; Ward, *Australia and the British embrace*.

informal influence in the dominions. The need for a prestigious commercial lobby (which wished to see a stronger centre) belies Robinson's argument that the 'autonomous meshing' of expatriate interests and dominion governments secured commercial interests. Commerce, it seems, was far from relaxed about the slackening of political bonds; more so perhaps than financiers who had better reasons to expect that their views to be taken into account by dominion governments, and who have dominated the debate surrounding gentlemanly capitalism and 'structural power' in the dominions. The Congress could easily be seen as another pan-British world network to join the ranks of journalists, female imperialists, academics, and even feminists and labour activists who pervade the literature.⁷³ Yet to consider this another British world network would be to confuse the ends with the means. This was not a network but an institution, and an institution that owed its existence to a broader political framework, a framework frequently glimpsed yet insufficiently acknowledged in writings on the British world.

Thus, the Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire by its nature indicates a broader hiatus in both of the dominant paradigms through which the British settlement empire has come to be understood. The missing element has been an explicit recognition of the empire's evolution into a federal polity (notwithstanding the failure of more formalised schemes of imperial federation) which persisted until the demise of the Commonwealth. Contemporaries first called this Greater Britain, later the British Empire-Commonwealth and while they never quite resolved on the best approach to its governance, few doubted that there was a political entity to be governed. This polity spawned a broader institutional and political life that stretched well beyond the formal intergovernmental relations and negotiations that dominated the older literature on the Commonwealth (which withered under the influence of Robinson and Gallagher and has yet to be reconnected with scholarship on the British world).⁷⁴ Within this broader political life, the politics of imperial commerce embodied in the Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire played an important – and hitherto neglected – role.

⁷³ Potter, *News and the British world*; Pickles, *Female imperialism*; Pietsch, 'Wandering scholars?'; Woollacott, *To try her fortune*; Kirk, *Labour and the Politics of Empire*.

⁷⁴ Mansergh, *Commonwealth experience*; Hancock, *Problems of Economic Policy*; Hancock, *Problems of Nationality*; Miller, *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs*; McIntyre, *Commonwealth of Nations*; Drummond, *Imperial economic policy*; Holland, *Britain and the Commonwealth Alliance*.

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