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

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Abstract

In the last decade, historians studying Britain's relations with the self-governing settlement empire (the dominions) have emphasized the role of shared culture and dense networks in shaping what Bridge and Fedorowich have called the "British world." Recent scholarship has begun to discern a political life within this British world, at times resurrecting the term Greater Britain. This article builds on these developments through research on a neglected pan-imperial institution: the Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire. The article shows that the Congress, which was dominated by chambers from Britain and the dominions, acted primarily as a business lobby seeking to shape aspects of pan-imperial economic governance. This conclusion highlights the need to place greater emphasis on patterns of politics and governance within the British World (or Greater Britain).

Keywords

chambers, commerce, empire, dominions, Greater Britain

Introduction: The Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire

Chambers of commerce emerged across the English-speaking world through the late-18th and 19th centuries as voluntary organizations formed to bring together businessmen in particular localities (usually cities) to articulate common interests and provide services for members (Bennett, 2011). Increasingly they formed associations and congresses on a national and supranational basis (Ilersic, 1960). In June 1886, the London Chamber of Commerce (a late-comer founded in 1882) 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) would bring together British chambers of commerce gathering at the exhibition for the annual meeting of the Association of Chambers of Commerce of the United Kingdom with chambers from the Empire. Following in the wake of J. R. Seeley's (1883) *Expansion of England* and the foundation of the Imperial Federation League (Burgess, 1984), the London chamber's journal explained that "federation in some shape, either commercial or political, or a combination of the two, has been recognised by the London chamber as the great factor in the industrial future of the British Empire."[1] Some 90 chambers and more than 250 delegates attended the Congress. The majority (61%) came from Britain and a further 26% traveled from the self-governing colonies (see Figure 1). The Congress met for 2 days under the chairmanship of the president of the London Chamber of Commerce, J. Herbert Tritton, who welcomed his "kith and kin from the other side of the world" as "commercial interests afford us a common ground for discussion, and not for barren debate, but for the discussion which molds opinion and leads to important results."[2]

The 1886 congress generated an organization which persisted until the 1970s. The CCCE reconvened in 1892, 1896, and 1900, shifting location to the livery halls of the City of London. As Figure 1 shows, it remained dominated by Britain and the self-governing colonies (or dominions as they became known in 1907).[3] The dependent empire was invariably "represented" by White expatriate interests. In 1903, in a new departure, it met in Montreal, establishing a pattern of alternating between London and the dominions. The 1886 congress lasted 2 days; subsequent congresses lasted 4 or 5 days. From 1892, any chamber could propose resolutions and content for discussion and the outcome of votes on resolutions were determined on the floor of the Congress.[4] Intensive rounds of banquets, receptions, and garden parties accompanied congresses.[5] Until 1911, a

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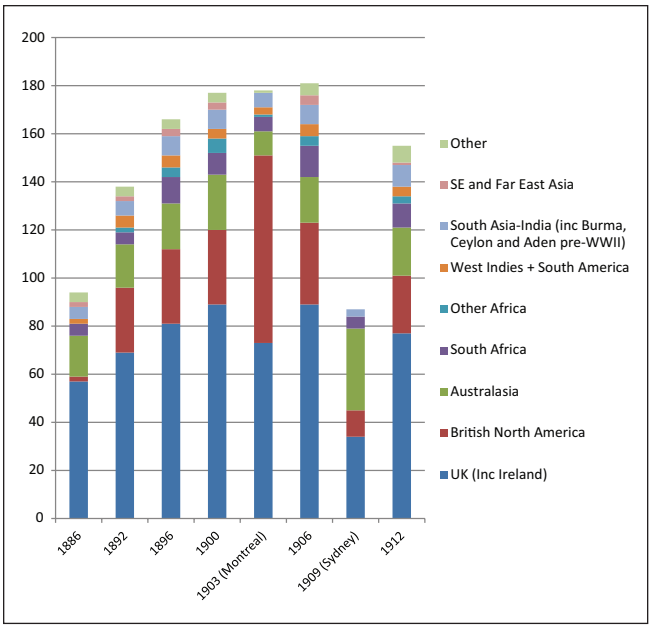

Figure 1. A breakdown of participant chambers in the CCCE, 1886-1914.
Source. *Chambers of Commerce Journal Supplements*, August 1886, p. 1, August 1892, pp. 1-2, August 1896, pp. 1-2; London Metropolitan Archive CLC/B/082/MS18287/1-2 (Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce Papers): *Reports of Proceedings at Congresses*, 1900-1909, 1911.

committee (unoriginally titled the "Congress Organising Committee") composed of leading figures of the London Chamber of Commerce, along with the colonial agents-general and high commissioners, arranged the Congress. Thereafter, a new body took over: the British Imperial Council of Commerce, still housed in the London chamber's offices.[6] The Congress persisted through the interwar period into the era of decolonization. The last congress was held in 1972, while the Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce, the successor of the British Imperial Council of Commerce, finally disbanded in 1975.[7]

By 1914, the CCCE had earned a high degree of recognition from leading figures of the day. The colonial secretary, Lord Knutsford, flattered the second Congress in 1892 that it was of "no less importance than the first Colonial Conference of 1887."[8] In 1910, the Birmingham historical economist, W. J. Ashley, described it as the "non-official commercial parliament of the empire" (1911, pp. xiv-xv). From 1892, eminent aristocrats, ministers, City-men, agents-general, and high commissioners lent their names to the proceedings as honorary vice-presidents. In 1896, colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain opened the third CCCE as the first honorary president, a position British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith accepted in 1912.[9] The Congress even enjoyed royal approval. The Prince of Wales granted the first Congress leave to convene in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition and attended the 1896 Congress's banquet.[10] In 1906, as Edward VII, he received a deputation of delegates. George V entertained 600 delegates and their ladies at Buckingham Palace in 1912.[11] Thus, by the outbreak of the Great War, the CCCE had established itself as a leading unofficial institution of empire, one which was to persist through to the era of decolonization.

Despite its sheer scale, scope, status, and longevity, the existence of the Congress has barely registered in subsequent studies. 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 (Davis & Huttenback, 1987; Hynes, 1979; S. B. R. Smith, 1985).[12] The older literature on the evolution of the Commonwealth ignored it, favoring the study of evolving intergovernmental relations (Hancock, 1937, 1942; Mansergh, 1969; Miller, 1974; McIntyre, 1977). Even W. D. McIntyre's important but isolated work on the nongovernmental institutions of the Commonwealth makes no mention of the Congress (1991). Neither do the few published studies of chambers of commerce in Britain (Bennett, 2011; Ilersic, 1960). The Congress has attracted passing attention in Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson's *Empire and Globalisation* and Andrew Dilley's *Finance, Politics, and Imperialism* (Dilley, 2012; Magee & Thompson, 2010). Both focus on the economic effects of the networks and information flows generated by Congresses rather than the purpose of the CCCE itself.

This article presents the initial findings of the first research project to investigate the CCCE in its own right. It argues that it is necessary to take seriously the Congress's self-professed function, outlined by Tritton, as a forum for formulating and pursuing common positions on matters of political economy. It shows that the Congress sought to shape many aspects of economic governance affecting commerce, focusing its attentions chiefly on either the British government, or—most frequently—the British and dominion governments together. This highlights the persistence of discernible patterns of economic governance integrating Britain and the dominions and concentrated in Britain, notwithstanding growing dominion autonomy following the concession of responsible government (internal self-government) to the main settler colonies in the mid-19th century.

The Historiographical Significance of the Congress

The CCCE's focus on economic governance fits uneasily with the main paradigms through which Britain's relations with the settlement empire have been understood by imperial historians since the Second World War. One line of argument follows Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher's suggestion that after the concession of responsible government to the settler colonies "it was possible to rely on economic dependence and mutual good feeling to keep the colonies bound to Britain." (1953, p. 4) Robinson and Gallagher allowed little conceptual space for the imperial center in the settler colonies. As Robinson put it, "the real motor of the [imperial]

process [lay] in the meshing of autonomous private enterprises with the internal politics of quasi-autonomous governments" (1986, p. 274, see also 1972, p. 124). This argument carried over into P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins's treatment of Anglo-dominion relations within their broader revisionist study of British imperialism, which emphasized the "structural power" generated by the dominions' dependence on London's financial markets (1999, pp. 202-210; 2001, pp. 205-240). A business association geared to lobbying at a pan-imperial level, focusing its attentions on the British government, would seem an eccentric luxury in the world of the imperialism of free trade and structural power (though see Attard, 2013).

A second approach to Anglo-dominion relations has emerged in recent years under the banner of the "British world." This literature also downplays the role of political institutions and argues that a broad set of social networks provided—to quote Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich—the "cultural glue" (shared identity) binding Britain and the dominions (and other pockets of Britishness) together (Bridge & Fedorowich, 2003b, p. 6, see also Bridge & Fedorowich, 2003a; Buckner & Francis, 2005; Darian-Smith, Grimshaw, & Macintyre, 2007). Drawing on this sociocultural framework, Magee and Thompson's (2010) recent study of the economics of the British world argues that "co-ethnic networks," information flows, and shared identity created a "cultural economy" (at times including the United States), which formed a densely integrated segment of the world economy. Magee and Thompson downplay the role of institutions and the British state in shaping this cultural economy. Thus, they conclude in their analysis of 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" (pp. 11-14, 17, 133). The Congress certainly fits the emerging picture of the unofficial transnational networks permeating the British world. However, a self-appointed parliament of commerce composed of businessmen formulating resolutions on pan-imperial political economy and seeking to influence policy seems anomalous in the world of the cultural economy, where the British state and the empire were not "active ingredients."

The anomaly is best resolved if a greater role is assigned to political economy and political institutions than the sociocultural conception at the core of the British World allows. An unofficial parliament may reflect the persistence of a polity, however difficult to pin down. Given the overwhelming importance of Britain and the self-governing colonies in the Congress, it may be more helpful to think of that polity not as the British empire in the round but rather as a "Third British Empire" (Darwin, 1999) or, with James Belich, to adopt the contemporary term Greater Britain. Belich writes of "Greater Britain" that "it was not just a failed idea. It had no formal shape, no federal constitution, yet it was an important economic and cultural reality" (Belich, 2009, p. 460). Yet, perhaps Belich's point can be pushed further. A growing body of scholarship has highlighted the political projects operating within Greater Britain (Bell, 2007; Palen, 2010; Potter, 2003, 2004, 2007; Thompson, 2000). Thus, notwithstanding the failure of formalized schemes of imperial federation, it is becoming clear that Greater Britain possessed a political life beneath and beyond relations between its constituent governments. This article builds on this emerging picture, stressing that Greater Britain not only possessed a high level of political activism, but also discernible practices of policy coordination and economic governance (see also A. Smith, 2013). These practices were shaped by responsible government and dominion aspirations for autonomy and, as a result, were complex, subtle, and involved coordination and cooperation between Britain and the dominions rather than British dominance. As we shall see, this "mezzanine federation" possessed a political as well as cultural and economic reality for commercial elites.

To substantiate this case, the remainder of this article seeks to demonstrate that the CCCE can only be explained as an attempt to shape a discernible framework of economic governance within Greater Britain, and to a much lesser extent within the dependent empire. It draws on previously unused or underused archival materials, especially the published accounts of the Congresses debates, the papers of the British Imperial Council of Commerce, and archival materials from the London Chamber of Commerce, supplemented by the correspondence of participants, of other chambers, and the contemporary press.[13] First, the article sketches the economic context within which the Congress emerged, showing how economic patterns provided chambers of commerce with powerful motives to cooperate. Second, it considers the degree to which the Congress can be explained as a means of forming networks and for disseminating commercial information: the processes at the heart of Magee and Thompson's account of the cultural economy. The CCCE undoubtedly acted in both capacities, but there were other and better means to form networks and disseminate information. The final section provides an overview of the Congress's debates and lobbying activities, showing that its central purpose was to shape the framework of political economy within which commerce operated. Crucially, while contemporaries recognized the networking potential and cultural aspects of the Congress, they repeatedly emphasized its role as a vehicle to influence policy.

Trade in the Late-Victorian and Edwardian Greater Britain: Some Trends

The CCCE emerged against the backdrop of complex shifts in world trade in the late-19th and early-20th centuries (Saul, 1960, pp. 43-63). Magee and Thompson have recently confirmed D. C. M. Platt's observation that during this period,

Table 1. Distributions of British, Australian, and Canadian Trade, 1886-1913 (Averages).

	Britain		Australia[a]		Canada[b]	
	Imports (%)	Exports (%)	Imports (%)	Exports (%)	Imports (%)	Exports (%)
Portion of trade with the foreign sector[c]						
1886-1900	77.66	66.14	19.52	24.10	47.55	37.37
1901-1913	76.78	64.49	39.90	41.51	60.18	40.28
Average 1886-1913	77.22	65.32	29.33	32.48	53.87	38.83
Proportion of trade with the rest of the empire[d]						
1886-1900	22.34	33.86	80.48	75.90	38.44	55.00
1901-1913	23.22	35.51	60.10	58.49	28.23	56.72
Average 1886-1913	22.78	34.68	70.67	67.52	33.33	55.86
Proportion of trade with Dominions/Britain						
1886-1900	10.70	15.60	68.74	68.63	36.52	51.01
1901-1913	12.00	16.12	53.29	49.71	24.25	51.59
Average 1886-1913	11.35	15.86	61.30	59.52	30.38	51.30

Source. Adapted from Schlote (1952, Tables 4-6, 20b); Vamplew (1987; Series 67-80, 152-166, pp. 189, 196); Leacy (1983; Series G381-388).
[a]Australian data begins in 1887.
[b]Canadian data based on 5 yearly snapshots for 1886-1911.
[c]Australian Data for New Zealand, Canada, and India only after 1901; includes Britain for Australia and Canada.
[d]United States Only for Canada.

Table 2. Annual Growth in British, Canadian, and Australian Trade, 1886-1914.

	Britain		Australia[a]		Canada[b]	
	Imports (%)	Exports (%)	Imports (%)	Exports (%)	Imports (%)	Exports (%)
Average annual growth in trade with the foreign sector[c]						
1886-1900	2.47	2.78	9.90	13.68	2.48	1.18
1901-1913	2.67	4.44	8.90	8.37	14.63	8.42
Average 1886-1913	2.62	2.55	9.40	11.02	9.77	5.52
Average annual growth in trade with the empire[d]						
1886-1900	1.51	1.55	2.27	3.78	−1.31	6.01
1901-1913	4.75	5.96	3.40	3.49	11.18	6.36
Average 1886-1913	3.21	2.43	2.84	3.64	6.19	6.22
Average annual growth in trade with Britain/Dominions						
1886-1900	3.02	2.41	2.23	3.26	−1.37	6.27
1901-1913	4.26	5.63	3.93	4.35	10.01	5.87
Average 1886-1913	3.79	3.20	3.08	3.81	5.46	6.03
Average annual growth in all trade						
1886-1900	2.25	2.27	3.69	5.83	1.04	3.77
1901-1913	3.10	4.89	4.71	5.22	12.57	7.35
Average 1886-1913	2.73	2.50	4.20	5.53	7.96	5.92

Source. Adapted from Schlote (1952, Tables 4-6, 20b); Vamplew (1987; Series 67-80, 152-166, pp. 189, 196); Leacy (1983; Series G381-388).
[a]Australian data begins in 1887.
[b]Canadian data based on 5 yearly snapshots for 1886-1911.
[c]United States Only for Canada.
[d]Australian Data for New Zealand, Canada, and India only after 1901; includes Britain for Australia and Canada.

British trade with imperial and particularly dominion markets proved more dynamic (i.e., grew faster) than trade with the foreign sector (Magee, 2007; Thompson & Magee, 2003, 2010). Tables 1 and 2 summarize the key trends across the period 1886-1913 in the commerce of Britain, Australia, and Canada, the main players at the Congresses. The British data bear out Magee and Thompson's arguments. The empire provided just under a quarter of British imports, and received about a third of British exports. The dominions accounted for a little more than half of all Britain's imperial trade, an average of 11.35% of all imports, and 15.85% of all exports. Moreover, as Table 2 shows, the average annual growth of

trade with the dominions exceeded the expansion of either foreign or empire trade across the whole period (although during the Edwardian period the growth of trade with the empire as a whole marginally outpaced the dominions alone). Overall, the dominions in particular, and the empire more generally, were becoming increasingly important markets for British traders.

Trends in Australian and Canadian trade did not exactly mirror those of the mother country. Although the empire became more significant for the British, the foreign sector played an increasingly important role in Australian and Canadian trade. However, the overall portions of trade with Britain were far greater in the Canadian and Australian cases. Throughout the period, the empire as a whole took an absolute majority of Australian imports and exports. The proportions declined markedly in the Edwardian period, and Britain alone ceased to take an absolute majority of Australia'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 (Meredith & Dyster, 1999, pp. 59-69).

The proportions of Canadian exports to the empire held firm at just more than half across the period, while the proportion of Canadian imports from the empire (chiefly from Britain) declined. However, the Canadian experience was very different before and after 1896. In the 1880s and the early-1890s the Canadian economy grew slowly (Urquhart, 1992). British markets provided the most rapidly growing market for Canadian exports and absorbed an average of 38% of imports. From 1896, Canada experienced an explosive boom driven by inward investment, transcontinental railway construction, industrialization, population expansion, the settlement of the prairies, and the exploitation of other raw materials (Bothwell, Drummond, & English, 1987, pp. 55-83). As a result, the overall volume of Canadian trade grew dramatically (from 1901-1913 at an average annual rate of 12.57% for imports and 7.35% for exports). Booming Canada's imports and exports grew so dramatically, and diversified sufficiently, 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. Even after 1896, Britain remained a major and expanding market.

Imperial markets were not the fastest growing for either Australia or Canada, but the overall volume of trade made them a significant proportion of the whole. Moreover, Australian and (in the Edwardian period particularly) Canadian governments and businessmen sought not only to generate trade but also to attract inward investment and migrants, and the primary source of men and money remained in Britain (Dilley, 2012, pp. 2-3). These commercial and investment dynamics within the empire provided incentives for businessmen to seek to form networks *or* to shape the regulatory framework governing sizable or dynamic intraimperial economic transactions. Which of these two possibilities—political economy or cultural economy—dominated and drove the CCCE?

Cultural Economy and the Congress: A Crucible for "Co-Ethnic Networks"?

To show that a desire to shape the framework of political economy within which commercial activity in the empire (particularly in Greater Britain) took place, it is helpful to first examine the degree to which Magee and Thompson's concept of cultural economy can explain the activities of the Congress. Magee and Thompson argue that what they call "co-ethnic networks" facilitated the development of economic connections in the British World, and have argued that the Congress contributed to this process (Magee & Thompson, 2010, p. 147; see also Dilley, 2012, pp. 99-101). What role 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?

Certainly, networking formed one element of the professed purpose of the CCCE. 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."[14] It is likely that individual networks were formed during Congresses, although beyond assertions to that effect by the *Chamber of Commerce Journal* this is difficult to verify.[15] Nonetheless, there were other (and indeed more efficient) means of making individual contacts than sitting listening in silence for 4 days to formal debates. Indeed, a skeptical Western Australian agent-general, Walter James, judged the 1906 CCCE "too large in numbers for delegates to become personally acquainted."[16]

The Congress may have been more effective as a means to advertise whole regions. From 1903, the Congress began alternating between London and an overseas dominion. Although this development ran with the grain of dominion aspirations to express autonomy within the empire (Eddy & Schreuder, 1988; Jebb, 1905), it reflected the desire to advertise the trade and investment opportunities that each dominion offered—to exploit the networking and advertising potential of the concentration of a large number of businessmen representing the commercial cities of the empire in one place. This aspiration clearly underlay Montreal's invitation of the Congress to Canada in 1903 (see Figure 2). The shift was initiated by the Montreal Board of Trade with the support of a grant from the Canadian government.[17] As the Canadian finance minister, W. S. Fielding, observed, "the occasion is an important one and we ought to do the thing decently."[18] Great efforts were made to present the delegates



Figure 2. The Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire, Montreal 1903.
Source. Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs for 1903 (Toronto, The Annual Review Publishing Company, 1904), p. 319 (out of copyright).

with a positive and comprehensive overview of Canadian resources. They enjoyed free rail and steamship passage across the dominion, joined organized tours of the Maritimes and the West, and received complementary copies of the *Handbook of Canada* and *Statistical Yearbook of the Dominion*. The Montreal Board of Trade also produced lantern slides for the London Chamber of Commerce to distribute in Britain.[19]

Other dominions followed the Canadian lead and recognized the advertising potential of the CCCE. At the 1906 Congress, the Cape Town and Melbourne chambers competed to host the next meeting. The Australians triumphed not least because Canadian delegates supported their bid, calculating that large numbers of British delegates would travel across Canada en route.[20] The president of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce predicted that the Congress (which was later moved from Melbourne to Sydney) would be a "splendid advertisement for Australia," which then had a generally poor image in British financial and commercial circles.[21] Discounted travel and elaborate tours were again laid on for delegates.[22] The vice-president of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of the Commonwealth of Australia judged that the delegates had returned home "deeply impressed with the unbounded possibilities of this vast continent." He predicted that they would become "advertising agent[s]" disseminating "very satisfactory information . . . with regard to the position of Australia."[23] Certainly, Australia won a powerful friend in Albert Spicer, president of the Congress and of the London Chamber of Commerce, who spoke on Australia's economic potential in London and Birmingham and also wrote on its resources (Spicer, 1911).[24]

Commercial networking was clearly an element sustaining the Congress, and promoting particular regions more generally, provided one motive for dominion participation when the Congress traveled abroad. Yet most Congresses were held in London, and the use of overseas Congresses to advertise the dominions developed later and as an (not unimportant) adjunct to the CCCE's core activities. Moreover, as Magee and Thompson have charted so comprehensively, other means existed to promote networking and information flows, ranging from informal kinship ties and professional networks through to formalized tours and exhibitions (Magee & Thompson, 2010). 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. Networking and information flows are not sufficient to explain the establishment and persistence of the Congress. They were (possibly significant) by-products of its activities.

Commerce, Political Economy, and Greater Britain

The considerable time and expense that the Congresses involved suggest that we should take its discussions of pan-imperial (and especially Greater British) political economy seriously. As one Torontonian delegate put it during a heated debate on tariffs, "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."[25] Individual chambers devoted considerable energy to formulating their positions on Congress resolutions. The London chamber debated its stance extensively in its governing council and press reportage on the Southampton and Birmingham chambers, and the Canadian Boards of Trade, in the 1890s, suggest that it was by no means uniquely diligent.[26] Canadians were particularly active within the Congress. Indeed, in 1906, Walter James complained that the "great bulk of work was brought forward by Canada," that Canadians delivered long prepared speeches in the course of debate, and jibed that this "Niagara-like flow of Canadian eloquence . . . was a striking testimony to the extent to which these good people had been Americanised." [27] However tedious the result may at times have been, delegates came not only to mingle but to persuade.

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 Figure 3 provides a digest of the time devoted to various topics of debate. Broadly, proceedings focused either on micro-level matters specific to commerce (regulation, lighthouse charges, commercial education, the metric system, the codification of commercial law) or macro-level principles of imperial political economy (imperial preference, defense, political integration). The significance of micro-level regulation should not be underestimated, a point made by Magee and Thompson (2010, p. 147). For example, at the 1886 congress a good deal of discussion was devoted to Bills of Lading—the contracts between merchants and

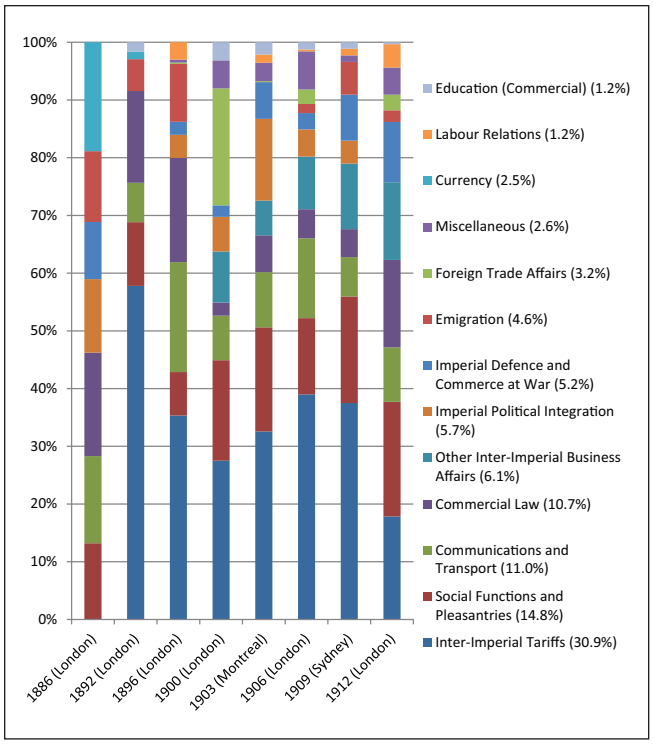

Figure 3. The subjects of debates at the congresses of chambers of commerce of the empire, 1886-1912.

Source. 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.

Note. The figures are based on measurements of the space (by quarter pages) taken up in the verbatim minutes on various resolutions which have been classified under the headings used in the chart. The numbers in brackets indicate the proportion of all discussion taken up by each subject during the period.

shippers for the carriage of merchandise. 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.[28] This was the kind of legislation which self-governing colonies often copied verbatim from the imperial government (Girard, 2008; A. Smith, 2013). A common position combined with effective lobbying had clear utility in this context.

The Congress also sought such common positions on broader macro-level pan-imperial political economy. These were subjects on which effective action required cooperation between the various constituent governments of Greater Britain. Agreement was rather more elusive, except through painstakingly constructed compromise positions. As a result, as Figure 3 shows, defense, imperial political integration, communications, and the promotion of emigration all attracted consistent attention and time in Congress. This was particularly true of the most controversial topic of all: proposals to promote imperial integration through schemes of mutually advantageous trading arrangements (imperial preference). Tariff policy occupied the largest proportion of proceedings, peaking at more than 50% in 1892, and averaging at least 30% from 1886 to 1914. This reflects the issue's importance and the difficulties of reconciling different parts of the empire to varying schemes of preferential trade in the context of the British government's adherence to free trade and dominion protectionism (Cain, 1979; Howe, 1997; Thompson, 1997).

The Congresses constituted one of the most public *pan-imperial* arenas within which the debate over imperial preference was conducted. Canadians were prominent advocates of various forms of imperial preference. In 1886 the London Chamber attempted to avoid discussion of tariff policy, but the issue was raised by the Canadian high commissioner, Charles Tupper, and his predecessor Alexander Galt.[29] Canadian boards of trade remained prominent advocates of various forms of imperial preference in subsequent Congresses.[30] This Canadian activism reflected fears of political absorption and a sense of economic vulnerability aroused by the U.S. McKinley Tariff of 1890 (Palen, 2010).[31] It also reflected the way in which particular chambers or groups of chambers could use the Congress as a means to garner support for their own agendas. Excepting the Canadian phalanx, debates on imperial commercial relations rarely broke down purely on "national lines." Thus, at early Congresses Sydney and Cape Town advocated free trade, while from 1903 increasing numbers of British chambers favored imperial preference (including London from 1909).[32] The balance of opinion in Congress (as expressed in its resolutions) shifted away from free trade through the 1890s and 1900s. In 1892, the Congress called for the abrogation of treaties obstructing imperial commercial integration on the "freest possible basis."[33] Joseph Chamberlain used the 1896 Congress to float the idea of an imperial *zollverein* (free trade area). This met considerable opposition and the 1896 and 1900 Congresses, respectively, called for an imperial conference and Royal Commission to consider imperial commercial relations.[34] The 1903 Montreal Congress called for a commercial policy based on "the principles of mutual benefit."[35] In 1906, the Congress passed a resolution calling for preferential treatment by a vote of 105 to 41, with 22 chambers abstaining.[36] In 1909, the Congress passed a resolution for "preferential treatment on a reciprocal basis" by 65 to 9 against (led by Manchester) and 17 abstaining (including Melbourne and Sydney).[37]

Congresses aspired to exert influence on the micro- and macro-level issues that they discussed. The Congress was justified through its supposed impact. Thus in Sydney in 1909 the president of the Congress, Albert Spicer (who was also president of the London chamber), asserted that previous Congresses had "done something in molding 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

Table 3. Correspondence on the Basis of 1912 CCCE's Resolutions Undertaken by the British Imperial Council of Commerce.

Government lobbied	Number of resolutions	Percentage of the 28 resolutions on which specific action was taken (%)	Percentage of all 41 congress resolutions (%)
United Kingdom	23	82.1	62.2
United Kingdom + at least some Dominions	17	60.7	45.9
United Kingdom Alone	6	21.4	16.2
Dominions	19	67.9	51.4
Dominions excluding United Kingdom	2	7.1	5.4
India	7	25.0	18.9
West Indies	3	10.7	8.1
Other dependent empire	2	7.1	5.4
Resolutions on which specific action was taken	28	100.0	75.7

Source. LMA: CLC/B/082/MS18283 (Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce Papers): Minutes of Meeting of the Committee of the British Imperial Council of Commerce, 16 July 1912, Minute Book, 1911-1926, p. 32-35; *Reports of Congress, 1912*, p. 2 and passim.
Note. CCCE = the Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire; LMA = London metropolitan archive.

supposed achievements across a range of fields, including: the development of colonial conferences and imperial integration; imperial defense (which was "rising in profile"); tariff reform (where the Congress had thrown "fresh light" on the subject); commercial law (where British legislation on a range of issues had been "digested by India and the colonies"); imperial transport and communications (for instance, the 1898 Imperial Penny post or rail construction in India and West Africa); international arbitration; voluntary 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," not least because "Chambers of Commerce are being increasingly looked to by our various governments for information and counsel on commercial matters."[38] While such self-justifying cant should be treated with caution, it reveals the degree to which the CCCE aspired to shape policy through collective action.

Aspiration generated action. From the outset attempts were made to give effect to Congress resolutions, and these attempts grew more, not less, systematized with time. From 1886 onwards, the Congress authorized the Congress Organising Committee to pursue its meticulously recorded resolutions. Three of the first Congress's seven resolutions called for further action (on imperial federation, the codification of commercial law, and bills of lading).[39] The Committee's minutes have not survived, and its activities can only be partly reconstructed. For example, in 1892, the Marques of Ripon received a deputation from the Congress Organising Committee seeking to extend merchandise legislation across the empire. In the same year, a member of the London chamber (S. B. Boulton) invoked a Congress resolution when arguing for voluntary arbitration in labour disputes before a Royal Commission on labour disputes.[40] By the turn of the 20th century, there was a growing concern to pursue CCCE resolutions more effectively. In 1900, a member of the London chamber's Council suggested an "abiding bureau" to continue the work between Congresses. As a result, the Congress Organising Committee became permanent, reporting to the London chamber regarding progress on Congress resolutions.[41] By 1909, leading lights at the London chamber had concluded that a more systematic approach was required. In that year, Alfred Spicer persuaded the Sydney congress to allow the establishment of a permanent organization so that "the work would continue without intermission from one congress to another" and resolutions would be "sent to the different governing departments with persistency."[42]

As a result, the British Imperial Council of Commerce was established in 1911. It reflected the aspirations to exert political influence which underpinned the Congress. The old Congress Organising Committee, with the addition of permanent members from the dominions, formed the nucleus of the new association which remained housed in the London chamber's offices. The Council's governing committee took the dissemination of the 1912 Congress's 41 resolutions seriously, considering each in turn. It decided to take specific action on 28 resolutions, judging that the circulation of the Congress proceedings would be sufficient in six further cases, and noting that the Council had already acted on four further matters. This left just two resolutions on which no measures of any kind were considered appropriate.[43] Table 3 analyses their initial mailings on the basis of Congress resolutions, indicating the peculiar contours of economic governance in Greater Britain. Of the 28 resolutions on which specific action was taken, 82.1% were sent to the British government, 67.9% to various "self-governing colonies" (as they were described), while only 7 were sent to India, 3 to the West Indies, and 2 to the dependent empire. 68% of resolutions acted on involved lobbying more than one government—with the U.K. and dominion governments the most common recipients of joint resolutions. Only two resolutions

were sent only to dominion governments. The centrality of the British government discounts any possibility that this was an organization geared toward exerting informal influence over the dominions while highlighting the continuing importance of the metropole in economic governance. However, this pattern indicates again the overwhelming dominance of Greater Britain in the congresses' activities, as well as the convoluted nature of lobbying in that mezzanine federation.

Given this, it may come as no surprise that the Congress consistently favoured a more integrated and rationalized governing structure for the empire (while remaining studiously vague on the problematic details). This began 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."[44] A year later, the first Colonial Conference (a meeting of the British government and the premiers of the self-governing colonies) took place (Kendle, 1967). Those involved in the Congress often discerned connections between their activities and the growing level of consultation within the Empire. In May 1895, the *Chamber of Commerce Journal* claimed that the unofficial intergovernmental conference in Ottawa in 1893 was "stimulated by the spirit of the London Congress of 1892" and noted the "close resemblances of the proceedings." Moreover, one delegate in Ottawa (James Hoddart) had told the conference that his projects for improving communication between Canada, Australia, and England had been the result of "the impressions made upon him by the London meeting."[45] When opening the Montreal CCCE in 1903, Lord Strathcona (Canadian High Commissioner) asserted that the 1900 Congress carried "no little weight" in causing the 1902 Colonial Conference.[46] Such claims should not be entirely discounted. The CCCE was the closest unofficial equivalent of the conferences and anticipated by several years their development into a formal and *regular* consultative mechanism between the governments of Britain and the empire. It made sense for a pan-imperial business association to seek to strengthen the central institutions of the empire which it sought to lobby, albeit in ways compatible with responsible government and dominion autonomy.

Conclusion

The CCCE aspired to (and believed it could) shape the framework of imperial (particularly Greater British) political economy. Growing British trade with the dominions and the large proportions of dominion trade conducted with Britain provided commercial elites with powerful incentives to seek to shape the framework of political economy within which they operated. 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*. The time and effort devoted to the debates themselves and the increasing concern to articulate the emergent views to a host of governments in themselves reflect the existence of a pan-imperial framework of economic governance, falling within the remit of multiple governments. Within this mezzanine federation it made sense for chambers of commerce to cooperate where they could establish common interests on matters ranging from fine-grained regulatory detail through to the macro-level concerns. The extent to which the Congress succeeded in shaping policy requires further research. Participants certainly believed that their deliberations had an impact. However, the argument made here is not dependent on the Congress having had a discernible impact on policy. Rather the point is that there was a discernible policy framework (and hence polity) which could (potentially) be influenced through collective action.

The Congress's focus on shaping pan-imperial political economy fits uneasily with the paradigms which have dominated historical understanding of relations between the settler colonies and Britain. An organization focused on lobbying the imperial centre or the centre in conjunction with dominion governments cannot be understood as a means to exert British informal influence in the dominions. It was not a vehicle for Robinsonian "collaboration" or "structural power." The Congress could be seen as another pan-British world network or (more accurately) an association joining the ranks of journalists, female imperialists, academics, and even feminists and labor activists who pervade the literature (Kirk, 2011; Pickles, 2002; Pietsch, 2010; Potter, 2003; Woollacott, 2001). Yet, to consider this another British world network would be to confuse the means with the ends. The CCCE highlights the existence of broader political framework which can be glimpsed but is as yet insufficiently acknowledged in the conceptualization of the British world around social networks and shared identity. Yet notwithstanding responsible government and the failure of more formalized schemes of imperial federation, discernible practices of policy formulation and coordination encompassed Britain and the dominions (the "Third British Empire," "Greater Britain," and later the "old" Commonwealth). This polity and its practices of governance framed a broader political life that stretched beneath and beyond the formal intergovernmental relations and negotiations. Within this broader political life, the politics of commerce embodied in the CCCE played an important and hitherto neglected role.

Notes

1. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, June 1886, p. 127.
2. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, June 1886, pp. 127-128; July 1886, pp. 157-158; *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, August 1886, pp.1-2.
3. The terms *self-governing settler colony* and *dominion* will be used interchangeably for the sake of simplicity in this article.
4. *London Metropolitan Archive* (LMA hereafter) CLC/B/150/16459/ (*London Chamber of Commerce Council Minute*

Books, LCCMB hereafter) 001/227, 230: "Council Meeting," April 12, 1892, 12 May 1892; LCCMB 002/22: "Council Meeting," November 14, 1895; LCCMB 003/001/425, 436: "Council Meeting," June 14, 1906, July 5, 1906.

5. LCCMB, p. 65; *Morning Post*, July 12, 1886.
6. LCCMB 004/002/361: "Council Minutes," February 8, 1910.
7. LMA, "Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce," Catalogue Description, Available from http://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/LMA?LOGONFORM [Consulted February 7, 2013].
8. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, August 1892, p. 3.
9. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, June 1896, p. 1; LMA CLC/B/082/MS18287/001 (Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce Papers, FCCP hereafter): *Official Report of the Forth Congress of Chambers of Commerce* of the Empire, June 26-29, 1900 (*Official Report*, 1900 hereafter), p. 1; *Official Report of the Fifth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, August 17-21, 1903 (*Official Report*, 1903 hereafter), p. 2; *Official Report of the Sixth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, July 10-12, 1906, p. 1 (Official Report, 1906 hereafter); *Official Report of the Seventh Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*. September 14-17, 1909, p. 1 (*Official Report*, 1909 hereafter); LMA CLC/B/082/MS18287/002: *Official Report of the Eighth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire*, June 11-14, 1912, p. 2 (*Official Report*, 1912 hereafter).
10. "The Court," *The Graphic*, June 13, 1896.
11. Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1907, p. 621; Official Report, 1912, p. 82.
12. Davis and Huttenback, *Mammon*, pp. 256-259; Hynes, *Economics of empire; Smith*, "British Nationalism," pp. 250-256.
13. It is, nonetheless, the fruit of an ongoing research project. This limits the ability of the article to discuss at length the motivations of British regional and overseas chambers in the Congress. South African and New Zealand chambers participated in its activities, but were less prominent than British, Canadian, and (to a lesser extent) Australian chambers. Space in any case would constrain a fuller discussion. The points made here regarding the existence of a political life within Greater Britain and the Empire, and a discernible policy-making framework are not dependent on an analysis of the precise ways in which individual chambers sought to shape that framework through the Congress. The form and function of the Congress itself is sufficient to substantiate the case made here.
14. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, June 1903, p. 1
15. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, July 1906, p. 155; January 1909, p. 4.
16. Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS412/5/277, 315 (Walter James Letterbooks): James to Chamber of Commerce of Freemantle, July 13, 1906.
17. Canadian Chambers of Commerce were known as Boards of Trade, with the exception of the francophone Montreal Chambre du Commerce.
18. Archives Canada, Wilfred Laurier Papers, MG/26/G792/226/63545: Fielding to Laurier, March 10, 1902.
19. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, 1903, p. 266; *Official Report*, 1903, p. 151, LCCMB, 002/159, 183: "Council Minutes," November 12, 1903, January 14, 1904.
20. National Library of Australia, Deakin Papers, MS1540/1/1501: James to Deakin, August 17, 1906.
21. Public Library of Victoria. MS 10917/I (Melbourne Chamber of Commerce Minute Books), June 25, 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*, February 1, 1909.
22. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, March 1909, p. 65; *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, October 1909, p. 10.
23. 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.
24. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, January 1910, p. 4.
25. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, July 1896, p. 15.
26. See, for example: LCCMB, CLC/B/150/16459/001/239: "Council Meeting," July 14, 1892; LCCMB, 002/24, 271: "Council Meeting," June 4, 1896, May 10, 1900; 003/001/106-8: "Minutes of Joint Conference of the Council and Organising Committee of the Fifth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire and the New York delegation," April 30, 1903; LCCMB 003/002/429-432: "Special Committee on the Resolutions of the Sixth Congress of Chambers of Commerce of the Empire," July 5, 1906; LCCMB 004/001/225, 235-238: "Special Council Minutes," June 7, 1909, Council Minutes, July 8, 1909; LCCMB 005/001/71-2, 89-90: Council Minutes, March 14, 1912, May 9, 1912. See, for example, "Birmingham Chamber of Commerce," *Birmingham Daily Post*, January 29, 1892; "Trade between Great Britain and the Colonies," *Cheshire Observer*, February 15, 1896.
27. Mitchell Library, Sydney, Walter James Letterbooks, MSS412/5/277, 315: James to Chamber of Commerce of Freemantle, July 13, 1906; James to Waxman, August 3, 1906.
28. See the debate at the 1886 Congress, *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, August 5, 1886, pp. 42-49.
29. LMA: CLC/B/150/MS16466/2 (London Chambers of Commerce Papers): "Organising Committee," *Rough Minute Book*, December 15, 1885; *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, August 1886, pp. 12-16.
30. See, for example, *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, 1892, pp. 18-43.
31. *The Economist*, June 2, 1892, p. 852.
32. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, July 14, 1892, pp. 19, 26-27; *Official Report*, 1903, pp. 49-103; *Official Report*, 1906, pp. 10-37; Official Report, 1909, pp. 15-47.
33. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, July 14, 1892, pp. 5-46.
34. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, June 9-12, 1896, p. 44; *Official Report*, 1900, p. 34.
35. *Canadian Annual Review* (1904), p. 322.
36. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, July 1906, pp. 43-44; *Official Report*, 1906, pp. 25, 37, 47.
37. *Official Report*, 1909, pp. 14-21, 47
38. *Official Report*, 1909, pp. 12-13.
39. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, August 1886, pp. 20, 22, 43-48.
40. "Merchandise Marks in the Colonies," *Glasgow Herald*, November 2, 1892; *Morning Post*, November 30, 1892, p. 4
41. LCCMB CLC/B/150/16459/002/278, 370: "Council Minutes," June 14, 1900;, LCCMB CLC/B/150/16459/004/001: "Council Meeting," February 14, 1907.
42. LMA CLC/B/082/ MS18283/001 (FCCP): Albert Spicer, "Report of Proceedings of the Inaugural Meeting," *British*

Imperial Council of Commerce Minute Book, July 5, 1911, p. 3
43. LMA: CLC/B/082/MS18283 (FCCP): *Minute Book, 1911-1926*, July 16, 1912, pp. 32-35.
44. *Chamber of Commerce Journal Supplement*, August 1886, p. 19.
45. *Chamber of Commerce Journal*, May 1895, pp. 17, 78.
46. *Official Report*, 1903, p. 10. See also Albert Spicer's remarks in *Official Report*, 1909, p. 12.

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