

Commonwealth Secretary-General Remarks for inaugural Commonwealth Lecture

The Commonwealth at 75

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The Commonwealth

[Check against delivery]

Good morning.

In his powerful address to the UN General Assembly on 25 March, Sir Henry Beckles, Vice-Chancellor of this great university, lauded the 'super-humanity' of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

They have always been two of my heroes - I'm sure that is true for all of us - and today I call to mind Madiba's words: "remember to celebrate milestones as you prepare for the road ahead"

Last week, we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Modern Commonwealth. This pearl of a university celebrates its own 75th year too!

And today, we come together to reflect on the importance and impact of that moment when eight leaders convened in the aftermath of the Second World War,

at the outset of the Cold War,

still standing in the long shadow of Empire,

to bring a touch of healing to relationships which were changing, but remained so important.

They created an association of nations which has not simply survived, but grown and thrived.

They formalised a set of connections which have evolved into an established framework for global leadership.

They gave us the foundations to face the challenges of the world with strength and purpose.

In doing so, they confounded history, and they changed the world.

Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II observed a Commonwealth which 'bears no resemblance to the empires of the past - an entirely new conception, built on the highest qualities of the spirit of man: friendship, loyalty and the desire for freedom and peace - and an equal partnership of nations and races.'

She was right.

From that initial group of eight, the Commonwealth today stands as a voluntary association of 56 independent sovereign states, spread across five continents and six oceans.

At 2.5 billion people, 60% of whom are under the age of 30, we encompass around a third of the world's population.

We comprise developed and developing economies; island states and land-locked states;

some of the largest populations of any country in the world, and some of the smallest;

five of the 10 fastest growing cities on the planet, and some of the most remote indigenous communities.

33 of our members are small states, of which 25 are Small Island Developing States.

15 of our 56 member states retain constitutional links with the Monarchy of the United Kingdom.

36 are Republics,

five have Monarchies of their own,

and four were never part of the British Empire.

Indeed, the enduring strength of our connections and relationships were shown when my dear sister, Prime Minister Mottley, was able to lead this wonderful country into a new constitutional era - calmly and without rancour - while continuing to be a powerful force within the Commonwealth and around the world.

Each of our member states is different, with different history, and different experiences.

But each is **united** in active, engaged membership of the modern Commonwealth, bound by the blend of practical advantages, common interests shared values which makes the Commonwealth unique.

And arising from all this is an essential truth: we are the world's largest association of democratic nations - and the most significant grouping of countries in the history of the world - which is bound, above all, by values to which we all aspire: the values enshrined in our ground-breaking Charter.

The strength of our combination of advantages, interests and values shines in the fact that, with a multilateral system under strain, **the Commonwealth as a multilateral organisation is growing precisely because of what we stand for and what we can deliver.**

This is special.

But sometimes, our experience is uncomfortable - I understand that.

There is no escape from the truth that the Commonwealth's story is one of a family at times scarred by old hurts and resentments.

Why would countries which were former colonies willingly decide to create such a union based on equality and friendship?

I asked my father the same questions.

The answer is a combination of principle and practicality which means that the reality of the modern Commonwealth is remarkable and hopeful precisely because of our difficult history.

Today, we meet as equals.

We have difficult conversations in a constructive spirit;

And we face the world's challenges together.

This has been the Commonwealth's hallmark.

You can see it in our collective refusal to turn a blind eye to apartheid.

You can see it in the ground-breaking Lusaka Declaration on Racism in 1979;

You can see it in the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment in 1989, which paved the way for the first Earth Summit.

In Leaders Statement on Climate Change ahead of the Paris Agreement in 2015, which paved the way for the Paris Agreement.

And in the landmark reference to 'loss and damage' in the 2022 CHOGM Communique, which set the tone for global agreement at COP27.

You can see it in the Commonwealth Charter, which created the framework for the Sustainable Development Goals.

And you can see it in our continuous, tireless fight for the small, the vulnerable and the marginalised.

Mandela said: "The Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity"

Indeed, the modern Commonwealth is an enigma of diversity and equality.

If it wasn't like this - if it didn't so confound its own history, and if it were not brave enough to look evil straight in the face and call it what it is - then it would not survive, and I certainly would not be Secretary-General.

The Commonwealth's interventions have been ground-breaking, and have often shifted the dial.

And today, in the face of the enormous challenges which are thrust upon us, we must have the courage to break new ground and shift the dial again.

We are living in a world which is under enormous pressure;

Tightly bound by a tangled knot of crises spanning global systems.

A world still living with the social, political and economic consequences of COVID-19.

A world of crippling debt, inflation and high interest rates.

Of spiralling costs for food and energy.

A world which is rocked by the tremors of instability and conflict.

In which the process, culture and institutions of democracy are under threat.

And as we attempt to navigate these straits, all the time, our nations are buffeted by the increasingly harsh impacts of climate change.

Each of these challenges can be characterised as a grave and serious crisis.

But they interconnect, entwine and worsen one another.

What we feel in our lives is the relationship between these crises and the unique political, economic, social and geographical circumstances - and inequalities - of the societies in which we live.

The shocks are disparate, but they interact, so the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

They combine and accelerate to amplify existing social, political and economic inequalities, and bring forward the tipping point for conflict.

Their effect is acute bursts of pain, combined with the gradual worsening of collective human prospects.

It is a grim reality.

But the world has faced grave challenges before.

What **defines** our present predicament as unique is the lack of single causes and single fixes.

And the way in which human activities have pushed the planet's ecological systems so far out of balance that all other global systems are in danger: from the production of food and energy, to finance, trade and international security.

What makes it so **intractable** is the dilemmas it creates, where attempts to resolve one crisis worsens another, like when poverty reduction measures increase fossil fuel emissions.

How do we respond to these challenges?

What role is there for the Commonwealth in the eye of such a storm?

After eight years as Secretary-General, it is clearer to me than ever that we require a level of international political and economic cooperation which is unprecedented in this century.

Yet these crises are manifest at a time when the multilateral system is under immense pressure.

Indeed, they contribute to that pressure.

The world feels as though it is fracturing.

In an increasingly polarised environment, people are anxious about the capacity of governments and international institutions to provide the leadership and action required.

It is in precisely a context such as this that the Commonwealth can mobilise its greatest qualities.

The world today insists that we are dependent on each other.

75 years of friendship, connection and common action mean something.

We are blessed with the ingenuity and imagination of a third of the world's population, including one and a half billion people under the age of thirty.

Our shared humanity contains an immensely precious diversity of thought, culture, tradition and experience.

Our Charter, which gives expression to our defining values - peace and justice; tolerance, respect and solidarity; care for our environment, and for the most vulnerable among us - is not simply a list of ideals.

It is an imperative to act, and to make a practical difference in the lives of the 2.7 billion people who call the Commonwealth home.

Whether on climate change and biodiversity loss, youth opportunity and education, global health, or economic co-operation, the Commonwealth can play - and does play - an indispensable role in the most pressing issues of our time:

offering us unparalleled strength not merely to face the future, but to build it.

The credibility of the Commonwealth, and our leadership, lies in our programme of practical action, support and assistance for our member states - which is more comprehensive today than at any other time in our 75-year history.

This support is hard-headed, responsive and ambitious.

It is holistic, it is tailored and it is action-oriented.

And I want to use an example which is close to home.

We stand here today in a small island state.

One of the most beautiful, enchanting countries in the world.

People come here from all over the world to sample your beaches, your food, your culture - and they leave with hearts full, and a keener sense of what makes life worth living.

Two thirds of the world's Small Island States are in the Commonwealth.

Despite making up only 3% of the world's land area, they are vital for the whole of humanity and the planet we share.

They safeguard 11.5% of the ocean's Exclusive Economic Zones, which includes 7 out of 10 coral hotspots, and 20% of all terrestrial bird, plant, and reptile species.

Their abundant - yet largely untapped - human and natural capital offer untold potential.

Yet they face an exceptional convergence of hardships.

Geographic remoteness, limited economic diversification, inadequate infrastructure, and heavy reliance on outside funding sources mean that when exogenous shock hit, our small island states are hit hard.

These shocks cause tremendous economic and human suffering, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and undermining resilience.

We see the evidence all across our Commonwealth.

In 2004, hurricane damage cost Grenada 200% of her GDP.

In 2017, hurricane Maria devastated my own country of birth, Dominica, costing 225% of her GDP.

Last year, Vanuatu was devastated by category 5 cyclone Lola, which hit seven months after twin cyclones Judy and Kevin had wiped out 50% of her GDP.

The Bahamas had to live through Dorian: the biggest hurricane in human history.

And Tonga had to deal with the impacts of a Tsunami caused by the eruption of an underwater volcano which was hundreds of times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It is not only our small island states.

One third of Pakistan was left underwater, with devastating displacement and loss of life, after unprecedented flooding.

Bangladesh remains tragically at risk as a result of sea level rise.

Malawi has faced crisis after crisis because of cyclones and floods.

These are just a handful of examples.

There are scores more.

We are in a full-blown emergency.

We all see it and feel it.

Our hearts break with every life lost, every home damaged, every livelihood destroyed.

And for our small states the damage is particularly pernicious.

It is deepened by limited fiscal space.

Across our Small Island States, the average Debt to GDP ratio (65%) outweighs the global average (62.5%).

This is further compounded by the restricted access to concessional development financing which many small island states have.

This financing is critical for the growth of their economies and for cushioning shocks, but the barrier to access is too high for too many - even for many of the most vulnerable.

With no alternative, countries are often left with no option but to obtain financing on unfavourable terms, resulting in an accumulation of high debt burden, creating a vicious cycle where debt becomes unsustainable and access to finance becomes even more limited.

That is why I have made championing small and vulnerable states at the global level - and finding new ways to support them at the practical level - a clear priority during my time as Secretary-General.

Through our Meridian Programme, we help our members improve debt management, with a combined portfolio of more than 2.5 trillion dollars of public debt under management across 50 countries.

Our Climate Finance Access Hub has unlocked more than 360 million dollars for our most vulnerable members, with \$500M in the pipeline .

Our Blue and Living Lands Charters bring all our member states together to address shared challenges and designed shared solutions for land and oceans exemplifies it too.

Through our partnerships, we have developed a new tool to derisk climate investments in small island states - enabling them to access more money much faster.

And through our CommonSensing project, we are utilising satellite technology and analysis of geospatial data to help our vulnerable members make informed decisions about climate risks and build resilience.

This meaningful, practical, impactful support is elevated by our global advocacy, which can range from supporting member state initiatives - such as Prime Minister Mottley's work for reform of the global financial system - to playing a leading role in international climate talks, in IMF & World Bank Meetings, and the UN General Assembly.

When this blend of support and advocacy is taken together with our wider work, its scale and value is impossible to ignore.

We are not a formal trading bloc, but trade costs between Commonwealth countries are 21 per cent lower, on average, compared to trading with non-Commonwealth members.

Intra-Commonwealth investment has increased by nearly 30% since I took office.

Indeed, pan-Commonwealth trade now stands at 800 million dollars.

This will rise to 1 trillion by 2026, and 2 trillion by 2030.

Through our Universal Vulnerability Index, we are changing the debate about development finance.

Through our Anti-Corruption Benchmarks, we are helping to close the gap between the financing we need to achieve the SDGs, and that which is stolen every year by corruption.

Through our work to train public sector leaders, we are successfully improving the performance of governments across the Commonwealth - helping them to keep the promises they make to their electorates, and setting a new global standard for delivery.

Through our Commonwealth Says No More campaign, and our economic empowerment efforts, our work to end Violence Against Women, and to enable women to participate fully in political and economic life, is reaching more and more people every day.

Our work to protect the process, institutions and culture of democracy - as well as our quiet-but-essential work for peace - serves not just the Commonwealth, but the wider world.

The same is true for our pioneering Youth Development Index, which has been an essential tool in supporting youth development.

Again and again, governments both inside and outside the Commonwealth have told us how they have used our YDI to make critical judgements on initiatives and policies.

And its annual results show moderate-but-steady and meaningful improvement in youth development across the Commonwealth.

This speaks volumes about the Commonwealth's resilience.

[Pause]

This is just a snapshot of Commonwealth today, in 2024. Our role, our relevance, our value.

And it is important that we use the opportunity of this anniversary to reflect.

But the point of looking back is to enable us to look forward with more knowledge, with a deeper understanding, and with a sharper insight into what comes next.

If our history teaches us anything, it is that we do not always know what challenges we are going to face.

And my reflection after eight years as Secretary-General is that the very fact of the polycrisis we are living through shows us that, for governments, multilateral institutions, businesses and civil society, business as usual is not enough.

It is not enough to simply manage the impact of our problems.

It is not enough to simply react to the next challenges.

If that is our approach, we will be locked in an ever-descending spiral.

We must innovate.

We must transcend.

We must build a better future by rediscovering our confidence in humanity's ingenuity, and combining it with the hard-headed strategies which can unleash it.

The problems of the world today too often divert our attention from the most profound technological advancement in the history of human civilisation.

More people are connected to the internet than ever before.

New technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, cloud computing, internet of things, have become critical to nearly every sector.

They are driving profound changes in our daily lives, changing how we consume, produce and work; how societies connect, and how businesses are run.

By the end of this decade it will have completely transformed our societies and our economies.

It will transform our politics too.

The difference between success and failure in the world today, and tomorrow, will reside in the ability of Governments all around the world to understand, master and harness new technologies to drive positive change:

in healthcare;

in education;

in transport & infrastructure;

in governance, trade and justice;

to make our societies more equal, more fair, healthier, more prosperous, more resilient and more secure.

To we can achieve carbon neutrality and avoid the worst affects of climate change.

15.7 trillion dollars is expected to be added to the global economy by AI and digitalisation before 2030.

The time to act is now.

So before I leave this office, I am absolutely determined to establish the Commonwealth as definitive world leader in this field;

So that each of our 56 Government have the knowledge, capacity and confidence to capitalise on the extraordinary opportunities technology offers us.

So that each of our countries have an equal opportunity to share in its bounty.

So that we can close the digital divide, and close the gaping skills gap, to ensure the benefits of technological change are felt fairly, and equally, by every region, every country, and every citizen.

Through our partnerships with tech giants, we are training tens of thousands of young people in digital skills.

Through our Artificial Intelligence Consortium, we are setting a new standard for the use of AI in government and throughout society.

Our Law Ministers; our Trade Ministers, our Finance, Health and Education Ministers; our Youth Ministers; our Ocean Ministers; our Environment and Women's Affairs Ministers are all coming together to agree paradigm shifts in pan-Commonwealth policy and practice.

By the time we reach our next Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa in October, we will have developed the world's most dynamic and comprehensive political and economic framework for harnessing the best of technological change to deliver real results for all of our 56 countries, and 2.7 billion people.

A Smart Commonwealth. A connected Commonwealth. An innovative, successful Commonwealth.

Because of our natural advantages, and unique blend of strengths, the Commonwealth is uniquely placed to achieve this:

Because of our shared interests.

Because of our practical similarities: in language, common law, regulatory coherence, business procedures, and large and dynamic diaspora communities.

And, above all, because we have a unique capacity to lead the technological transformation with our values.

A scalpel can save a life, or it can take a life - and it is only by applying and insisting on our values and determining which path we can take so that we can guarantee the future.

These values of peace and justice, of tolerance, respect and solidarity - and our role as the foremost international champion for small and vulnerable states - are an enduring responsibility.

They express a vision for the world that will outlast all of us.

They make us different.

They make us special.

I believe profoundly that, taken together, they mean that the Commonwealth today, 75 years on from our beginning, is not simply a part of the international system, it is a beacon within it.

In our troubled world, we have a responsibility to ensure that we do not simply talk about these values, but that we ensure they shape the choices we make in the face of profound global change and challenge.

Because values matter most when they are being put to the test.

This anniversary is a special opportunity to renew our commitment to ensure that they do not simply represent words on a page, but the lived experience of all - now and for generations to come.

Our extraordinary potential is more than equal to the challenges we face.

And each of 27,393 days since the birth of the modern Commonwealth - good days and bad days - has brought us to this point of incredible opportunity:

To bring people together, drawing strength and inspiration from what we share, to create genuinely durable future;

in which no one is left behind;

in which the goal of a more secure, peaceful, fair, advanced and sustainable world for everyone, everywhere is advanced

and in which we can all enjoy the kind of prosperity which is in harmony with nature and that will also secure our unique and only planet for generations to come.

The incredible connections between our nations have sustained and enriched us for more than seven decades.

Our commitment to peace, progress and opportunity will sustain us for many more.

This is our history, and our promise; our experience, and our aspiration.

So let us continue to stand together, and strive together, in restless and practical pursuit of the global common good.

Thank you.