

A Stronger Commonwealth

Secretary-General's Welcome Reception, Lancaster House | 5 June 2025

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Statement by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Hon. Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey

Rt Hon. David Lammy, UK Foreign Secretary; Excellencies; Nana Kwafu Akoto III, traditional ruler of the Akwamu people, who has joined us from Ghana; distinguished guests; dear friends: thank you all for being here.

It is my privilege to welcome you – and I thank the Government of the United Kingdom for making Lancaster House available to us. The United Kingdom has extended the most outstanding support to me in my new role as Secretary-General, and I am most grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his commitment to the Commonwealth and for his kind words this evening.

Let me also convey my deepest appreciation and thanks to all Commonwealth member countries, and our partners, for their unflinching support, especially since my assumption of office.

All of us here, we are the servants, partners and stewards of the Commonwealth ideal. This welcome reception reflects my ambition to build strategic partnerships across the Commonwealth for the benefit of our citizens. I thank Lady Dentaa and the GUBA Foundation for sponsoring this event.

In this historic room, we are reminded of the influence and consequence of our Commonwealth. Again and again, the principled stand, the defining discovery and the life-saving advance have emerged from within this family of nations.

I acknowledge and salute the contributions of past Secretaries-General since 1965: Arnold Smith; Shridath Ramphal, recently deceased; Emeka Anyaoku; Don McKinnon; Kamallesh Sharma; and Baroness Patricia Scotland, who has kindly joined us this evening.

Today, we gather at a moment of great global consequence – and we need every ounce of that inspiration.

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Our nations feel an unprecedented combination of overlapping pressures: a planet pushed to its limits; rising inequality, debt and faltering development; systems designed to serve us, now outmoded and increasingly unresponsive to the hopes and expectations of the majority of our peoples; the erosion of trust between people and governments, nations and institutions, north and south, east and west; and threats to the sovereignty of our nations, and the democratic processes our collective stability depends on.

Ours is an age so turbulent it has defied labels, save perhaps the 'age of insecurity'; when everyone from the fisherfolk in my Ghana constituency to the presidents of powerful nations and every person I know feels the system isn't working for them. We are at a true fork in the road. And it feels like the storm before the storm.

This is a moment defined by disorderly reversals. For the Commonwealth, it must be defined by purpose: by the values we hold, the shared prosperity we create and the resolve with which we act.

As an elected politician, a Foreign Minister, and now as Secretary-General, I've heard people describe their disappointment in the Commonwealth. But I have heard many more people express their hopes and expectations in a Commonwealth that works for all its citizens.

The Commonwealth is a living promise – of unity, of co-operation, of progress and sustainability. The Commonwealth is proof that we can overcome our past; that we can take the good, while calling out the bad; that we can find unity in purpose, not identity; that we don't have to look east or west, south or north, just forward.

In a world this fractured, we are a space for solutions.

Fifty-six nations across five continents. A third of the world's population – most of it young. We share language, law and institutions. And we believe in lifting everyone, not leaving anyone behind.

But tonight, as we stand here, we know that too many of our nations – and too many communities within them – do feel like they are being left behind, by the pace and scale of change and challenge.

Our small island states are trapped in a vicious cycle: battered by climate impacts they did not cause, denied access to affordable finance because they are judged 'too rich' to be vulnerable, and then forced to borrow at punitive rates just to survive.

This is the climate-debt trap – where the mechanism intended to help communities survive and recover becomes the mechanism through which they are impoverished. And it is why we must work together to unlock new metrics, design better support, and lead a global push for fairer rules.

Because the climate crisis is not tomorrow's threat – it is today's emergency. It affects every region of our Commonwealth, through floods and fires, failing harvests and rising seas. We see it in the anxiety of our youth, the despair of our farmers and the damage done to our economies.

Our Commonwealth cannot – will not – simply echo global calls for climate justice. By the will of our Heads of Government, we will continue to lead those calls. For finance that reaches the frontlines – faster, fairer and in full. For a renewables revolution – investing in clean energy, creating green jobs and building a future of resilience. And for a new development co-operation, as we stand with our developing countries – because their prosperity is our prosperity.

In a world where inequality is rising, growth is stalling and new economic pressures are being brought to bear, I see a Commonwealth that drives transformation – transformation that is built from the ground up, with trade at its heart.

Trade among Commonwealth countries is 21 per cent cheaper. Intra-Commonwealth investment is growing. We share language, systems, trust and opportunity. But we must do more than measure our advantage – we must harness it. By backing our developing states to move from the periphery to the centre. By unleashing our women entrepreneurs, youth innovators, and digital industries. By building a Commonwealth of Nations where opportunity is not a function of geography or GDP, but a function of being part of this family.

That is why trade, investment and economic resilience are at the core of my vision – as a promise of service, based on our comparative advantage, and rooted in our proven ability to work together. Because, especially in this moment, smart and high impact co-operation is essential.

I truly believe the world needs a purposeful, ambitious, effective Commonwealth, ready to turn the page and move forward as one. So, while I take on this role at a time of great disruption and uncertainty, I also have enormous hope. I know that the Commonwealth is capable of turning around the fortunes of its people. Together, we can harness our youth dividend, trade and investment dividend, climate dividend, democracy dividend: our Commonwealth dividend.

That is why we are reforming the Secretariat. We have the opportunity – and responsibility – to put our strengths at the service of our Commonwealth. Along with our dedicated team at the Secretariat, I will support you in every way I can, to make this hope a reality. And together, we can reap the Commonwealth dividend.

Excellencies, colleagues, friends: the challenges are real – but so is our power to meet them. This is our moment to lead when others hesitate. To build when others retreat. To act multilaterally – not because it is easy, but because it is essential. That means standing firm on our values – democracy, human rights, good governance and peace – and acting on them, not by taking sides or shouting from behind a screen, but by showing that these values are the key to prosperity and the democratic dividend.

That is our task. And that is the journey we will take – with humility, with unity and with purpose. Let us rise to this moment.

To all those who live within our union, let us join together to make this, truly, a Commonwealth that delivers.

Thank you.