

Speech by Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC
Secretary-General of the Commonwealth of Nations

Marlborough House, London

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Thank you for that introduction Janet, and let me put on record my thanks for the support my home country of Dominica – along with others from the Caribbean – gave me at the start of the long journey that has culminated in today.

I will never forget the support, solidarity and love that you and so many others showed me along the way. It's lovely to see so many people who were part of my campaign here today. Thank you.

I would also like to thank my predecessor, Kamallesh Sharma, for a lifetime of dedication to public service and especially to thank him for his leadership of this organisation over the last eight years.

On a personal level, I would also like to thank him and his beloved wife Babli Sharma for the support, hospitality and welcome they have extended to me and I thank them for that. Thank you.

It's with a mixture of pride, responsibility, some anxiety but most of all optimism and excitement that I stand before you today, humbled to have been appointed the sixth Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

So let me tell you a bit about me and more importantly what I hope to achieve over the next four years.

I'm a classic child of the Commonwealth, born in the Caribbean, my mother from Dominica, my father from Antigua, the tenth of twelve children. I moved to the UK as a child and have so many friends and family across the 53 countries of the Commonwealth. I was brought up to believe that every single one of us has a talent. Our job to find that talent, hone it and then use it for the benefit of other people. That's what I've lived by.

I have achieved some firsts along the way. The first black woman to be a QC. The only woman to have been Attorney General since the post was created in 1315.

And now I stand here as the first woman Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

But if I'm honest, I have always been rather sad that I'm the first. More than that, I certainly don't want the first to also be the last. So, I am looking forward to where the next generation of female leaders will come from, and the next and the next after that.

And I will be so happy when someone tells me I'm the second or the two hundred and second woman to be appointed to a post so many women have already qualified for.

The Commonwealth I now serve covers a third of the globe's population. That's over two billion people across five of the world's largest regions with more than half of them under the age thirty.

Over the last few years I have visited many countries across these five regions. I have spoken with political and faith leaders, men and women on the street, and most importantly to the young people about what they see as their biggest challenges.

And what their hopes and aspirations are for the Commonwealth of the future.

I want to briefly share some of those messages with you today as I believe that the Commonwealth Secretariat can amplify their voices so they are stronger and louder.

My agenda

I want to put the wealth back into Commonwealth but I also want to put the common back into wealth. There are four themes that I want to focus on as Secretary-General.

First, tackling violence against women and girls.

This has always been a priority for me. Domestic violence affects one in three women across the world and I don't need to tell anyone here about the pain and lasting damage it causes not just for those directly affected but for us all.

Violence and abuse robs children of the ability to develop and grow into their full potential and so it is literally stealing all our futures.

Across the Commonwealth people have told me that if we continue to allow women to be abused and disregarded then that has a huge impact on the social and economic health and wellbeing of our world.

If there is not peace in the home, there will not be peace in our world.

Secondly, the existential threat of climate change.

I come from a small island so this is something I understand all too well.

And for so many of the Small Island States this is not about the future, we are living with the reality of climate change now and have been for decades.

But people have also told me how working together can make a difference – put simply, we would not have the global climate change agreement without the work started by Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean and the Pacific, forward to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to success in Paris last November.

And there is so much more we can still do.

Everyone wants to see the commitments we've made in Paris turned into real action, there is so much we can learn from each other and so much we can show the world about building resilience and finding innovative solutions which work, to make the world safer for all of us.

Thirdly, trade and good governance.

One of the big issues that we have all identified today – not least in the UN Sustainable Development Goals – is how we together address corruption, champion good governance, human rights and the rule of law in line with the Commonwealth Charter.

We are fortunate in the Commonwealth that we share the common law we can create a best practice toolkit to deal with corruption and other legal challenges.

Fourthly, young people – 60% who are below the age of thirty – who are our greatest asset, because our true common wealth is who we are and who we want to become.

So many young people have shared with me their vision for a future that is bright and hopeful and we need to make sure they have the health, the security and safety, the support in social and cultural skills and education to make those dreams a reality so they are not tempted by the destructive agenda of the extremists.

A confident Commonwealth

And for us to do all of this, for the Commonwealth to be a beacon of knowledge, and understanding in the world, if we are to really meet the aspirations and hopes of all the people we serve then we need to get our own house in order.

I want to start a conversation with you, member states and citizens about how we own the values we all share - as a family of nations and peoples – a real commonwealth.

I'm confident that we can change things for the better. I want the Commonwealth to be the voice for everyone who shares our common values and hopes.

Yes we face some of the most critical challenges that many of us have ever seen – challenges that threaten our very existence – but together, working and acting as one people – one family - we can make a different future.

I believe passionately in what the Commonwealth stands for and what we can achieve together because no one achieves anything on his or her own.

Our real wealth is what we have in common – our shared humanity, our capacity to love one another and our common desire for a world in which everyone – no matter who they are – can expect to live their life to the full.

Conclusion

I've had a fascinating journey from being born in a small village in St Joseph, Dominica, growing up in Walthamstow in the East End of London and then to the House of Lords and now to Marlborough House for the Commonwealth.

As the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth I am determined that we are going to work together on tackling violence against women and girls, deal with the existential threat of climate change, promote trade and good governance, champion the health, wellbeing and human rights of our citizens, and ensure our young people have the opportunities they need for the future.

Ambitious, yes, but achievable with help from my friends in this room and around the Commonwealth.

As someone said to me in Malta, alone we are invisible. Together we can be invincible.

Let's get to work.

Thank you.