

Commonwealth Day 2021 speech by High Commissioner Charles Hay

It's a great pleasure to be taking part in Commonwealth Day 2021 with at least a few people around me, even if we are all in masks. The very essence and heart of the Commonwealth is our people to people links, and while we have all got used to virtual meetings, having at least some people together to celebrate this day seems very appropriate. I am relieved that the latest MCO was lifted in time for us to have this event. My thanks to the Royal Commonwealth Society of Malaysia for hosting us this evening.

It seems an age ago now but it was just a year ago that the British High Commission, as Commonwealth Chair-In-Office, co-hosted Commonwealth Observance Day with the Royal Commonwealth Society of Malaysia. It was almost the last 'normal' event we had before Malaysia and much of the world went into Covid lockdown.

This past year has been unique and difficult for all of us in different ways. We have faced multiple challenges and in many cases, personal tragedy or economic hardship. This has affected all countries large and small, rich and poor.

However, out of diversity, we find strength and resilience and we innovate to find solutions. Scientists around the world have worked at a speed few thought possible, to make multiple vaccines available, and the number of people vaccinated around the world multiplies by the day. We have all had to find virtues in the virtual world too – although we don't have many guests here with us tonight, for the first time we are filming and live-streaming this event to a much bigger virtual audience across Malaysia and overseas.

In the UK, for the first time in over 50 years the decision was taken to cancel the Commonwealth Day Service at Westminster Abbey. But instead, Commonwealth Day has been celebrated on television with the broadcast of a very special programme 'A Celebration of the Commonwealth' on BBC1 on the eve of Commonwealth Day.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also meant that the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting due to be held in Rwanda in June last year had to be postponed, which has meant that the UK has had a further year as Commonwealth Chair-In-Office.

Although the world has been in lockdown for much of the last year, the work of the Commonwealth has continued. This is a critical year for our natural world, which has long been a focus for the Commonwealth. 2021 is the first year of the UNESCO Ocean Decade. And this year will see both COP26 climate negotiations and COP15 Convention on Biological Diversity, when world leaders will come together to agree the steps to build back greener and live more sustainably and in harmony with nature.

I have been privileged as British High Commissioner here in Malaysia to represent the UK as Chair in office for two years now and to witness the steps Malaysia has taken in that time to progress the Commonwealth's goals: Fairness; Prosperity; Sustainability and Security. Just to mention a few examples of many:

- the Parliament of Malaysia hosted the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy's Asia Regional Women's Political Leadership Conference, focussing on policies and initiatives which mainstream gender equality across the Asia region
- Malaysia completed the SheTrades Commonwealth pilot, supporting women-owned businesses to become more competitive, promoting economic growth and job creation
- Malaysia was one of four Commonwealth member countries to have the I-Work project designed to improve the employment prospects of young people including those from disadvantaged backgrounds by piloting and introducing new approaches to employer-led skills development
- the Universiti Malaya is one of five new universities to host Queen Elizabeth Commonwealth Scholars. Since April 2018, 47 scholars have benefited from this scholarship scheme
- Malaysia was the first country to begin creating an energy and emissions calculator, with the aim of creating easy-to-use energy models to support climate planning. For this, they used a £3.5 million budget extension to the 2050 calculator programme announced by the UK at CHOGM 2018

I was delighted that Dato' Sudha Devi, a most distinguished Malaysian diplomat, has been appointed Chair of the Commonwealth Foundation. And it has been very heartening to see young Malaysians being recognised and celebrated for their work and contribution to their communities, society and the environment.

This morning I was joined in a 'Blu Hope on Commonwealth Day' webinar by Mogesh Sabathy, who is the Co-Founder of Ocean Hope Project, a youth-led group that aims to raise the visibility of ocean issues and environmental conservation through campaigns and youth leadership training. Mogesh is a finalist in the Commonwealth Youth Awards 2021 – a great achievement in itself, and we very much hope Mogesh will go one step further and be one of the winners in the virtual ceremony to be held on Wednesday.

Malaysian co-founders of Zero Waste Malaysia, Khor Sue Yee and Aurora Tin are the most recent winners of the Commonwealth Points of Light Award. Their NGO is working in the community and with companies to get zero waste policies

adopted by Malaysians and businesses. The Commonwealth Points of Light award celebrates outstanding acts of volunteering, thereby inspiring others to volunteer and make a positive impact in their community. I'm especially pleased that Zero Waste Malaysia have taken the time to participate and support the series of 'Blu Hope' webinars in 2020 to help educate and inspire Malaysians to live a zero or near-zero waste lifestyle.

Today, as well as Commonwealth Day we are also celebrating International Women's Day. The Commonwealth Secretariat have marked this event with two social media campaigns #SheLeadsTheWay – celebrating women's leadership in the Commonwealth and #SeatheShe – recognising women's contributions to ocean science.

I would like to particularly mention three Malaysian women scientists who are working to help protect the ocean:

- Assoc Prof Dr Goh Hong Ching, Senior Lecturer at Universiti Malaysia and Malaysia lead for the Global Challenges Research Fund Blue Communities project and the NUOF Netcom Fish mangrove protection project
- Professor Zainura Zainon Noor, Deputy Director of the Centre for Environmental Sustainability and Water Security, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and key collaborator for Global Challenges Research Fund Water Security Hub
- Hui Ling, PhD Student at the University of Nottingham Malaysia, who is researching the effect of micro-plastics in the ocean

I now take great pleasure in introducing this year's Annual Commonwealth Day Message from Her Majesty The Queen, Head of the Commonwealth.