

# FS speech: 10th UK-Caribbean Forum, 18 March 2021

## **Introduction – UK-Caribbean links**

Excellencies, Ministers, Ladies and gentlemen, It's a pleasure to join you today, and to convene this important meeting.

The links between the UK and the Caribbean could hardly be stronger. With over one million people of Caribbean origin in the UK and over 200,000 British nationals in the Caribbean, we are more than friends, we are family.

From Mary Seacole to John Barnes, From Baroness Benjamin to countless NHS staff, People of Caribbean origin make an invaluable contribution to every aspect of British life.

They have built their lives and made their homes in the UK, Making the UK stronger, More vibrant, And more successful as a nation.

This is why we are acting urgently to put right the mistakes that led to the Windrush scandal.

Of course there are also many examples of British Caribbean people who have done great work in the Caribbean itself. I'm thinking of people like Arthur Wint who served in the RAF, Won the first medal for Jamaica at the Olympics, Trained at St Thomas's Hospital in London, And took his medical qualifications back to Jamaica. He went on to be posted back to London as the Jamaican High Commissioner.

Or business people like Ashley Parasram, Who established the Trinidad and Tobago Fine Cocoa Company... And is working to boost global trade in Caribbean chocolate.

There are many, many inspiring stories which show the strength of this relationship.

We want to keep building the links between our countries.

The fact that we have opened four new diplomatic posts in the Caribbean in the last 18 months... In Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Grenada, and St Vincent and the Grenadines... Underlines our commitment to the region.

There are many areas where we want to do more together. So I'd like to highlight three today.

## **COVID-19**

First, beating Covid-19 – surely the most pressing, crucial area that we face.

The UK is proud to be one of the biggest supporters of the COVAX initiative, committing £548 million globally to help deliver vaccines in developing countries.

This support will help supply over a million doses of safe and effective vaccines to six Caribbean countries by the end of this summer – enough for over 500,000 frontline workers and vulnerable people. In total, COVAX will provide 2.1 million doses to the region in the first half of 2021.

Of course we are also rolling out vaccines to British nationals in the Overseas Territories. We are determined to keep playing our full role in the global fight against the virus.

## **Economic recovery**

The second area I want to touch on is the toll that Covid-19 has taken on the economy, and our efforts to build back better.

Hundreds of thousands of people from the UK have experienced first hand the Caribbean hospitality and tourism industry. But Covid has hit the sector hard.

The IMF estimated that tourism-dependent Caribbean economies would shrink by almost 10% last year.

The UK economy has also been hard hit and we have had to make some tough decisions, including to temporarily reduce our aid spending.

But let me assure you that we will continue to play a key role in the region, including through our recent £21 million contribution to the Caribbean Development Bank's Special Development Fund.

We also continue to support the region's development through work on... Climate and disaster resilience, Economic recovery, governance and security, As well as through our flagship UK Caribbean Infrastructure Fund. This Fund is supporting 14 major infrastructure projects, including climate resilient investments in roads, ports, water supply and agriculture.

We want to work together to put our economies on the path to recovery.

Now that we have left the EU, the Economic Partnership Agreement between the UK and the countries of CARIFORUM has come into effect.

This will allow us to trade openly and equally – to the benefit of all.

The Agreement covers trade in goods and services worth £3.1 billion, providing duty free, quota free access for CARIFORUM goods, And opportunities to capitalise on our shared competitive advantage in the services economy.

Our Trade Envoys Darren Henry MP and Baroness Hooper are working to help companies take advantage of the new Agreement. And they'll be speaking on all of this later in the forum.

The international community has rightly recognised that Small Island Developing States are a special case for sustainable development, and we continue to put that into action.

We continue to advocate internationally on issues that are of greatest concern to SIDS, including on access to finance and development assistance.

And we have launched our new SIDS Hub to help tackle the unique challenges facing small island states, including providing technical and capacity-building support to help deal with climate change and its impacts in the region.

## **Climate Change**

Climate change is the third area I want to talk about today – and this builds directly on my previous point. We have to pursue a green economic recovery if we are to stop catastrophic climate change.

We recognise the urgent threat that climate change poses for the Caribbean.

2020 was marked by the most active hurricane season ever recorded, with 30 named storms doing untold damage across the region.

As you know only too well, the economic costs of climate change are sobering.

To take just one example, Dominica lost over 200% of its GDP as a result of a single hurricane in 2017. So we have to act, and we have to act decisively.

As President and host of this year's UN Climate Change Conference, we are leading efforts to achieve a step change in ambition.

We will ensure that Caribbean countries have a strong platform at that meeting, and in the lead up to it, and we will ensure that there is a major focus on the issues you care most about including adaptation, resilience and scaling-up climate finance.

We all have a role to play – but of course the biggest responsibility lies with the big emitters. We need them to act with urgency and at scale to reduce emissions – as the UK is already doing. We will champion this relentlessly as COP26 President this year.

## **Next Steps & Commonwealth**

There is so much we can do together – in these areas and many others besides.

We will take all of this forward in the quarterly meetings between Caribbean Heads of Mission in London and our Minister for the Caribbean, at the Joint Ministerial Council with the Overseas Territories, and – for many of us – at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held in Rwanda this summer.

CHOGM will be a key staging post on the road to COP26, and in our shared efforts to build back better after the pandemic.

Of course not everyone at this meeting is in the Commonwealth, but I believe it has an important role in the region – so let me just say a word on this.

With strong commitment and leadership, the Commonwealth can make a big difference in delivering on all of the areas I've mentioned today – especially on climate.

I was proud to lead on a Commonwealth statement reaffirming our rejection of racism and discrimination, which was unanimously adopted by all 54 member states at the Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministerial that I chaired in October.

And it was important to see Commonwealth leaders coming together with a strong statement on tackling Covid-19 last summer.

But we should raise our ambitions. I want to see the Commonwealth delivering much more as in the Caribbean and beyond.

The UK, for one, is committed to being a force for good in the region.

## **Conclusion**

So I look forward to our discussions today – and to hearing the feedback on the progress made at this Forum.

There's no doubt that the last year has been really tough for us all. And it is going to be tough for some time to come. But we are optimistic.

We are fighting back against the virus with vaccines. We are putting in place the building blocks of a better, greener recovery. And we are strengthening our cooperation so that we can meet the challenges and grasp the opportunities together.

Thank you.