

Speech: A revitalised and relevant Commonwealth: article by HMA James Dauris

46 Heads of Government, over 50 Ministers and 15,000 delegates attended. Heads of delegations met in London and at Windsor Castle, while Ministers and other participants took part in forums for women, youth, civil society and business, and dozens of side events and multilateral and bilateral meetings.

Discussions focused on the theme “Towards a Common Future” for the citizens of the Commonwealth and considered how the organisation needs to change and grow in order to remain relevant to their aspirations.

The Commonwealth is a unique institution built on deep partnerships. CHOGM 2018 reconfirmed the value of the Commonwealth as a modern forward-looking organisation, responsive to the global challenges we all face today, and will face in the future. The meeting showed how effectively the Commonwealth can unite its 53 Member States around issues of common concern, issues like equal access to education and environmental sustainability, both of them tremendously important to the billion young people who live in Commonwealth countries as they look to the future.

Commonwealth members used the opportunity to give further substance to commitments on limiting climate change with the launch of the ‘Commonwealth Blue Charter’ to protect the oceans, supported by a ‘Clean Oceans Alliance’ to tackle plastic pollution, which Sri Lanka joined. Sri Lanka will lead work on the conservation of mangroves in Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth’s uniqueness lies in its human networks. People-to-people links define the institution and we need to recognise and nurture them. President Sirisena in his address to the Commonwealth Business Forum highlighted how the government’s “Blue-Green” economic plan will aim to advance the full utilization of the ocean and the other natural resources of Sri Lanka in an environmentally-friendly and sustainable way. In his address to business leaders he commented on the importance of finding solutions to common problems: “There is no standard approach for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, and each country decides its own path. However the approach led by our countries should be people centred”, he said.

Leaders discussed the need for increasing cooperation across security challenges and committed to implementing global programmes that will facilitate better coordination of efforts. Agreement on the ‘Commonwealth Cyber Declaration’, the world’s most geographically diverse intergovernmental commitment on cyber-security co-operation, illustrated the opportunity for the Commonwealth to bring its members together to meet emerging challenges and threats to the security of all our countries. Commitments relevant to the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention also illustrated how the Commonwealth can bring members together behind approaches to common global

security problems.

The Summit also provided the opportunity for discussions on boosting trade and investment within the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth contains some of the world's fastest growing economies and its members account for one-fifth of global trade. Part of its strength lies in so many of its members shared instincts about the importance of open societies and open economies.

Sri Lanka pledged financial support as an anchor investor in the Commonwealth Small States Trade Financial Facility which will help small, vulnerable countries access global markets. Commonwealth small states are expected to have access to USD 300 million of incremental trade finance over a three-year period from this programme.

Sri Lanka leading the way in this endeavour demonstrates another truth of the Commonwealth – that the size of a country is not a limit to ambition and impact. In thanking Her Majesty The Queen for her years of dedicated and unfailing support the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, summarised this. The Commonwealth is a grouping in which “the voice of the smallest member country is worth precisely as much as that of the largest; [in which] the wealthiest and the most vulnerable stand shoulder to shoulder”. In the many outcomes of CHOGM 2018 we saw this reaffirmed.