

Speech: Africa's Young Commonwealth

Good evening everyone. I am delighted to be with you tonight.

I was appointed just last month as Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for the Commonwealth.

Ghana was an obvious choice for my first official visit to a Commonwealth country. Not only because your country was the first African member-state to join the Commonwealth family, 60 years ago this year; but also because of the close relationship our two countries have long shared.

It means that we see Ghana as one of our closest Commonwealth allies, one that will join us in building a Commonwealth that is truly fit for the 21st century. Crucially, from your point of view, we want it to be an organisation that truly represents its young people.

That's why I want to talk to you about the United Kingdom's plans for the Commonwealth Summit next year, and why they matter to you.

The Summit is a great family celebration that takes place every two years. Heads of the 52 Commonwealth governments get together and discuss the issues of the day.

Next year it is the UK's turn, so in April we will be hosting meetings at great historic venues, from Windsor Castle to Buckingham Palace.

But it's not all about pomp and ceremony. We want this Summit to have a real impact and to make a real difference to people's lives, right across the world.

The United Kingdom is a passionate supporter of the Commonwealth.

Why? First, because it is a unique institution, with vast global reach and influence. It has already achieved great things – just look at the impact it had on the Paris Climate Change agreement, when the Commonwealth heads of government came together in Malta in 2015 to push for a global agreement to tackle climate change. We strongly believe that the Commonwealth has huge further potential as a force for good.

But that's not the only reason. We also passionately support the Commonwealth because we believe that it quite literally represents the future. It is home to a third of the world's population and two thirds of them, like many of you, are lucky enough to be under the age of 30. You represent the future not just of your country and the Commonwealth, but of the entire planet.

That is why our bold ambition for the Commonwealth Summit is to re-invigorate and re-energise the Commonwealth. We want it to be an organisation that works for the benefit of all its citizens and the wider world: men and women, rich and poor, old and young.

And especially the young. Your voices and your opinions are as important to us as the views of the political leaders of the 52 member states. The organisation could – indeed we think it should – have a real impact on your futures. That is why we want you to play a part in re-shaping it.

You may ask why it needs re-shaping. To answer that question, let's step back in time for a moment.

60 years ago, and for the rest of the 20th century, the Commonwealth family offered support for newly independent countries – like Ghana.

Today the world has changed. Greater demands are being placed on governments – and on the planet. We face new challenges. Technology, globalisation, automation, conflict, terrorism, demographic change, climate change...

So the world is changing, and the Commonwealth must adapt and change too. Now is the time to realise its as yet untapped potential as a global force. For that to happen we, the member states, must agree to re-vitalise, re-energise and re-new the organisation. We must build an institution capable of meeting the new challenges of our rapidly changing world.

We see four key priorities for this revitalised institution:

The first is improving prosperity. The Commonwealth can help by boosting trade and investment between member countries. Our shared language and legal traditions are unique advantages that we should make more use of. Ghana, one of Africa's fastest growing economies, is well placed to help boost trade and to benefit from it.

If we can succeed in improving trade and business links around the Commonwealth, it means it will be easier for young people like you – it's no secret that Ghanaians are some of the most enterprising people on the continent – to set up businesses and sell their products abroad.

The second key priority is acting on climate change. It will affect us all, one way or another. In Ghana's case, rising global temperatures pose a real threat to cocoa production. Your exports would be severely affected. That is why, as we did in 2015, we must continue to work together to implement the promises we all made in Paris to increase the resilience of Commonwealth countries that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of Climate Change.

We also hope that other African Commonwealth countries will follow Ghana's example and ratify the Paris agreement.

The third priority is keeping our people safe. We still face the same threats that we did when the Commonwealth was founded – inter-state conflict, civil war, insurgency.

But the threats have also multiplied and become more sophisticated. We now also face violent extremism and terrorism. We suffer cyber attack, both state-based and criminal. And we know that organised crime operates, not on street corners but on the dark web, across borders and jurisdictions. We believe the Commonwealth could play more of a role in tackling these new

security challenges.

Our fourth priority is to build a fairer future, based on our shared values of good governance, democracy and human rights.

The organisation has a good record here – seven of Africa's least corrupt countries are in the Commonwealth, and our election monitoring work is the envy of the world. [I might add that your country is one of the strongest democracies in Africa, having held seven consecutive democratic elections.]

Young people here can play a vital role in promoting the benefits of an open, tolerant and democratic society.

These four priorities inform our approach to the Commonwealth Summit next year.

And we want young people like you to be at the heart of them all, because it is your futures we are talking about. Your prosperity, your security, your human rights, your world.

We can't do this without you. We need you to get involved with the Commonwealth, to help us build an organisation that can rise to the challenges of the future, and represent your interests on the world stage. As a leading African democracy we hope that Ghana, and young Ghanaians, will work with the UK and help us to realise our ambitious vision for the Summit.

I look forward to working with you to build a better future for the Commonwealth and the world. Thank you.