

Speech: High Commissioner's speech at the Queen's Birthday Party

The last 12 months have been an extraordinary period in modern British political history. On 24th June the British people woke up to the momentous news that they had voted to leave the European Union after over 40 years of membership. Despite predictions to the contrary, the UK economy has continued to perform strongly – indeed unemployment levels have fallen further below 5% and growth levels keep surpassing expectations. Meanwhile a new prime minister was rapidly appointed and an orderly transition ensued. The British political system, many centuries old, is tough and resilient.

The next historic date came on 29th March this year when the UK invoked Article 50 to begin the formal process of leaving the EU. Then came the surprise announcement of the general election to be held on 8th June. Political pundits are enjoying a field day. We must await the election result to see what is likely to happen next. But I will make two comments.

Firstly that Britain is, has always been, a global nation, forging a web of connections around the globe. Empire and mass immigration have cemented this. London is one of the world's most diverse and vibrant cities, with almost every language and ethnic group represented, including a large Zambian community. While Europe will always be immensely important for the UK, we are keen to enhance other links, such as with the Commonwealth, taking advantage of the next Commonwealth Summit to be held next year at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. I am delighted that a fellow Commonwealth mission, Canada, has recently co-located with us in the British High Commission's Lusaka office.

Secondly, trade between UK and Zambia suits both our interests. Trade and investment underpins our economies and creates jobs. An example of this mutual benefit is provided by Zambia Sugar, mostly owned by British Associated Foods through Ilovo Sugar, which exports a quarter of its total production to the EU, of which half comes to the UK. This is good for Zambia and good for the UK. Access for this sugar to the EU is duty and quota free – and it would be in Zambia's interest for this preferential access into the UK market to continue.

Turning now to Zambia, the last 12 months have been eventful here too. During the August elections, I visited polling stations in Eastern Province as an EU election observer. ECZ coped well with formidable logistics: I inspected one remote polling station near Petauke that had no roof and was enclosed by a reed fence, but was nevertheless staffed by all the right people and equipped with all the right equipment. Unfortunately the elections proved a turbulent period for Zambia. It will be important for Zambia to do better next time, drawing on the EU election mission's expert recommendations.

The UK quickly accepted the election results and recognised the new government. We have encountered a welcome readiness by the President and by

his Ministers to engage with international partners to further the country's development. There is much to be done together, including in the agricultural sector, where the UK works in close partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, and through CDC have invested £60 million in that highly successful Zambian company, Zambeef.

Sadly, one legacy of the elections is an entrenched political divide that has spawned the recent upsurge in tension. I have three observations to make following consultations with the Foreign Office in London.

First, respect for the head of state is a cardinal rule in international relations and democracies. The incidents in Western Province appear provocative. It should be possible to combine polite respect, and adherence to Zambian protocol, with disagreement and even legal challenge. I repeat that the UK, along with the rest of the international community, have recognised the Zambian government. Her Majesty the Queen rapidly congratulated HE Edgar Chagwa Lungu as the President of the Republic of Zambia, and we look forward to working in partnership with Zambia until the next elections.

Second, beware the hard-liners, who will use any excuse to promote heavy-handed tactics and creeping authoritarianism. The manner of what happened on the night of Monday 10th April represents a blot on Zambia's record that has been picked up by the international media and noticed in foreign capitals. The UK hopes this blot does not spread into a larger stain.

The UK firmly counsels that the best response to political divisiveness is more dialogue, not less; more openness, more freedom of expression, more media freedom, more tolerance, not less. Law and order is important, yes, of course, but must be underpinned by dialogue and compromise on all sides. We know this from decades of experience in Northern Ireland. I am being badgered by the BBC, by international investors, who are worried; Zambia has long been a beacon of peace and harmony, Zambians should not take this for granted.

Third, this political impasse is a huge distraction from what should really matter: the economy, of course. The UK commends the Government for embarking on a much-needed, Zambia Plus economic reform programme to address serious problems. We, together with other international friends of Zambia, are already assisting Zambia to implement reforms. The UK, as a development super-power, and with our position on the IMF Board, is well placed to help.

The challenge for Zambia is to reprioritise and mobilise revenue, and manage increasing debt, so that spending stimulates economic growth and protects the poorest, rather than disappearing into subsidies that benefit better-off Zambians and even British High Commissioners, instead of the 60% who still live in poverty.

During my first year in Zambia as British High Commissioner, I have particularly enjoyed travelling to far-flung corners of this lovely and friendly country. I have handled raw emeralds at the Kagem mine near Kitwe; sat with villagers near Pemba discussing goats purchased through cash transfer programmes; and even danced with the Minister of Higher Education at

a Lusaka ball. I have discussed State House's mischievous velvet monkeys with HE the President – along with rather more important matters of state. I have had tea at my Residence with the imitable Fred M'membe wearing his trademark communist party cap. Like many of us, I have gazed in wonder at natural spectacles along the Zambezi, Kafue, and Luangwa rivers, and hoped for effective action to prevent poachers robbing future Zambian generations of these rich national assets.