

Speech: Zimbabwe's future rests on a free and fair election: Speech by Ambassador Catriona Laing

Honourable Minister, Members of the Executive, Parliament and the Judiciary, colleagues of the Diplomatic Corps, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Queen's Birthday Party celebrations for 2018. This has been a fabulous year for Her Majesty the Queen, with the arrival of a new grandson, Louis, who becomes fifth in line to the throne. And of course the beautiful wedding of Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex to Meghan Markle, now the Duchess of Sussex.

Rock of stability

Her Majesty has just turned 92 years old and has served 65 years as The Queen. She remains an inspiration to and the figurehead of our nation. The Queen and her family are a rock of stability in the turbulent seas of economic and political change as Britain prepares for Brexit and a new role globally. Talking of change... of course, the last 12 months in Zimbabwe have not been entirely without incident! We do indeed live in interesting times. But I think they are hopeful times. You can feel it. Zimbabwe has a revitalised politics with new energy, new leaders and new ideas on all sides. There is an opening of political space, and the kind of vibrant public debate that we have not had for many years.

No room for complacency

There is no room for complacency however. Zimbabwe's future rests on the legitimate victory of a government chosen by the people of Zimbabwe in a free and fair election. So much is riding on this now. It will be the key to unlocking the reengagement of international institutions, to debt restructuring, to infrastructure investment, to re-joining the Commonwealth and to all the support we can give. This election will be observed and scrutinised more intensely than any other in Zimbabwe's history. I am delighted that European Union, US and Commonwealth observers will be joining SADC and AU and domestic observers to help make these elections as good as they can be.

Friend and partner

The British government wants to work with Zimbabwe as a friend and partner, and as equals on the basis of mutual respect. We want the economy to come back and will do everything we can to help the people of Zimbabwe to realise their full potential. We want Zimbabwe take up its rightful position in the international community, as a model of democracy, human rights and rule of law. We were absolutely delighted that the first steps have been taken to

rejoin the Commonwealth. The events of November 2017, were truly momentous and much has changed. Since then, two UK Government Ministers have been to Zimbabwe, along with several high-level official and business delegations. And in London, we have welcomed government ministers including of course you, the Foreign and Trade Minister, as well as Opposition leaders.

Delegation of UK investors

Just this week, our largest delegation of investors came and met with both the Government and the Opposition leadership. I think it is fair to say the investors were encouraged by what they saw, but they still want assurances around policy, political risk and the rule of law. As I look back over my time here, I am delighted to see the strengthening of UK/Zimbabwe relations. The foundation is of course the people-to-people links. Let me touch on those briefly. We are delighted to have a vibrant British Council programme, ably led in recent years by Sam Harvey, who sadly leaves this summer. The British Council runs Arts and Culture initiatives for young artists across the country. Their programmes focus on storytelling, insight and connections. They support creative hubs in Mutare, Bulawayo and Harare to showcase Zimbabwean and UK creative talent. This is the sort of talent that will be so important in the future economic and cultural life of Zimbabwe.

Improving food security

We are also proud that British people provide support to the people of Zimbabwe through the Department for International Development, led by Annabel Gerry. A few examples of what that means in practice: We have supported 2.3 million rural Zimbabweans gain access to clean water. We have helped 96, 000 children to have a decent basic education. We have trained over 150,000 farming households, increasing incomes and improving food security for more than 600,000 people. And through the whole British Mission we support Zimbabwe's civil society organisations so that all Zimbabwean voices are heard, whether they are the voices of women, young people, the vulnerable or those who identify as LGBTI.

Mentoring programme for cooks

I have particularly appreciated engaging with the women of Zimbabwe – from working with the brave female politicians standing up for a better, more equal future, to participating in a mentoring programme for aspiring, talented young cooks from disadvantaged backgrounds – and they are here with us today. I hope the new Zimbabwe will give a greater voice to the women – to the 52% of the population who need to be heard. Without this, Zimbabwe will never truly shine. Turning now to the theme of this year's QBP: Zimbabwe is wonderful and special place for nature and wildlife. But to protect these magnificent species we need to focus on the threat of wildlife crime and illegal trade.

British embassy wildlife initiatives

The Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, has identified clamping down on the illegal wildlife trade as one of his two highest priorities, and he is mobilising a British government initiative to defeat the trade in ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales and other illegally traded items. The British Embassy has supported a number of initiatives over the last year in this area. My team, raised the money, and support to renovate a Landrover used by the Akashinga all-female counter-poaching unit in the Mana Pools area. We funded the construction of a stock dam and fishponds for rural communities surrounding parks areas who need good access to water and alternative protein sources.

IWT conference

Over the next year we aim to do much more. And London will host a major international conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade in October this year. Whoever is President in October will be invited to attend that conference. I am delighted to introduce to you today Rumbi Magwiro from the African Lion Environmental Research Trust, Ronnie Chirumuta from Birdlife Zimbabwe and Prisca Daka and Moses Mutemiri from Speak Out for Animals. Prisca and Moses work on spreading knowledge of wildlife law in Zimbabwe. I am sure that you, like me will agree that these four young Zimbabweans demonstrate exactly why the future of this country can be so bright.