

Speech by the Commonwealth Secretary-General

The Rt. Hon. Patricia Scotland KC

At the Electoral Pledge ceremony,

Freetown, Sierra Leone

25 May 2023

High we exalt thee, realm of the free;

Great is the love we have for thee;

Firmly united ever we stand,

Singing thy praise, O native land.

Your Excellencies, Mr President, and Honourable Presidential Candidates, Members of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, the National Council of Paramount Chiefs, the Economic Community of West African States and all representatives of the National Electoral Pledge Committee,

Representatives of the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union and governments across the Commonwealth and beyond,

Representatives of Sierra Leone's youth and future,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we gather here on Africa Day, it is an honour and a privilege to be with you as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, representing our family of 56 nations, and 2.5 billion people, at the signing of this powerful, home-grown election pledge. A pledge which the Commonwealth has been proud to help facilitate.

I exalt you.

I was born in Dominica, a tiny island in the Caribbean, the tenth child of my parents 12 children. Yes, I know 12! They said they only had one of each of us. But through

my work - and my ancestors - so much of my heart is here in Africa, in West Africa, in Sierra Leone.

I am proud to be with you all on this historic day - this essential day - as we gather ahead of this vital Presidential Election. I told the President this morning that it is only Sierra Leone which would have allowed me to come on my 38th wedding anniversary, to be with you, as opposed to being at home.

And I can promise you that millions of people across this continent, and across our Commonwealth Family, are praying for Sierra Leone and its people, hoping that the courage, integrity and love which makes this nation so special will not fail.

**We raise up our hearts and our voices on high,
The hills and the valleys re-echo our cry;
Blessing and peace be ever thine own,
Land that we love, our Sierra Leone.**

From the Mountains to the Ocean, this election is a special opportunity:
To capture the spirit, energy and daring of a youthful people, who are active in their participation, and willing to shape the future of this nation.

To demonstrate your continued resilience - your ability to stand tall in the face of the great economic and environmental shocks and challenges which have been thrust upon you. To take your next decisive steps forward. And to show the world that the path towards development lies in unity.

**One with a faith that wisdom inspires,
One with a zeal that never tires;
Ever we seek to honour thy name
Ours is the labour, thine the fame.**

Ours is the labour, thine the fame. These words capture the very essence of democratic leadership: your labour, in the service of your country and its people.

Governing takes enormous courage, skill and heart. I applaud all the candidates who have put themselves forward. And I applaud you all for being here today to sign this election pledge. Your candidacy comes with a solemn responsibility, because the office of the President is a sacred trust.

And this election pledge is a solemn responsibility, because it goes far beyond symbolism. It is a promise each of you is making before the country and the people you strive to serve: To put your nation above yourself; to work together, prioritise the national interests and unity of Sierra Leone, by bringing people together for a new generation of Sierra Leoneans who can be proud of their land and thrive in it. With all the humility and service which leadership demands.

*We pray that no harm on thy children may fall,
That blessing and peace may descend on us all;
So may we serve thee ever alone,
Land that we love our Sierra Leone.
Knowledge and truth our forefathers spread,
Mighty the nations whom they led;
Mighty they made thee, so too may we
Show forth the good that is ever in thee.*

The life of a nation is a powerful story: a partnership between those who have gone before, those who are here with us now, and those who will come after us.

Our leaders are the custodians of that partnership - and your responsibility has a magnitude which is reflected across the generations. Your supporters, and every national institution, are listening to your statements and watching your actions. It is a heavy burden - I understand that.

But this is *your* moment: to enhance the culture, process and institutions of Sierra Leonean democracy. To be honest about the challenges we all face, but confident that a better future is close at hand. To show that we can live with love and respect for each other, even when we disagree. And to demonstrate the possibilities which

can come with transparent and credible elections, good governance, respect for human rights, the rule of law and inclusive participation.

These are your values; they are the values of the Commonwealth; and they are the guarantee of our continued growth and prosperity.

*We pledge our devotion, our strength and our might,
Thy cause to defend and to stand for thy right;
All that we have be ever thine own,
Land that we love our Sierra Leone.*

Courage, strength and might do not always roar. In a peaceful, thriving democracy, the calm expression of who we are, and what we hope for - our willingness to honour each other's dignity, to celebrate our shared humanity - is more forceful and emphatic than violence and division could ever be.

And in this moment of hope and commitment, the hour has come again to show who you are, what you hope for, what you care about, and what you strive for.

The eyes of millions of proud and hopeful Sierra Leoneans - the eyes of 1.3 billion Africans and 2.5 billion people of the Commonwealth - gaze upon Freetown.

236 years ago, freed slaves met together to plant the new seeds of freedom under the much-loved cotton tree. Today we plant the new seeds of freedom and peace for a Sierra Leone crafted to meet the needs of a new generation, who face the dangers of a world rent asunder by climate change.

Our heart bleeds to see the devastation and pain caused as nature cries to us to change.

I brought with me one of the branches from that tree. A tree that was struck last night, but a tree which will grow again. Just as we, in order to grow, die to sin and rise again, so the symbol, this symbol, of old freedom has been crushed so we can craft it anew.

We have to seize this moment.

Understand that we, with courage, fortitude and determination, can grasp this moment. Build unity, understanding and peace built on a renewed appreciation of the true beauty of this magnificent land and its people.

Sierra Leone has always shone, Sierra Leone will shine again.

It is a hopeful gaze, a loving gaze, that the world now turns on Sierra Leone. It is a hopeful gaze, a loving gaze; Together, we can say with all confidence that The Great Republic of Sierra Leone is ready. And I, in service and love, I say that I am with you. The Commonwealth is with you.

And from the bottom of my heart, I thank everyone who has helped to make this pledge possible, everyone who is present to sign it, and everyone who will exercise their democratic right in next month's election.

God bless you all. And God bless the people of Sierra Leone.