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Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) and the Royal Commonwealth Society Australia Event

**Keynote address by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth,
The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC**

The Commonwealth In A Changing World

(Pre-delivery draft)

Good Day to you all

May I say what a pleasure it is to be with you here at this historic Institute, whose origins we can trace back to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 in the aftermath of the First War World.

An institute which, to borrow a phrase from a past President, Richard Boyer, covers issues which go far beyond matters of intellectual concern, but leaves its mark on the actual turn of events.

I want to thank you all for welcoming me here.

It is wonderful to be back in Australia: this powerful, beautiful, famous and proud nation, situated in the vastness of the Pacific but at the heart of global affairs.

As a founding member of the Commonwealth, and as host of two Heads of Government Meetings, and five Commonwealth Games - with Victoria preparing to host the sixth in 2026 - Australia has been a central part of our Family of Nations for more than seven decades.

Australia's value and importance in the Commonwealth of 2023 cannot be overstated.

Your role in supporting the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, with an additional A\$2 million pledged at CHOGM 2022, has been essential.

Your funding for the Commonwealth Election Professional Initiative, which is now in its 3rd Phase thanks to a £900,000 grant in 2021, has done so much to boost our work to protect the process, culture and institutions of democracy across the Commonwealth.

Your support for our Small States Office in Geneva and New York has significantly enhanced the presence of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable countries in global diplomatic and trade negotiations.

And your support for our Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programme has been invaluable. That supported concluded last year, but there is a continued demand for CVE technical assistance, so there is a real opportunity to take this work further.

This work, facilitated by Australia's support, demonstrate the tangible impact of Commonwealth membership.

Let me take the Climate Finance Access Hub as one example. With Australia's support, our team has unlocked 70 Million US Dollars of vital support the countries which most need it. A further 500 million dollars is in the pipeline.

We have placed 18 national climate finance advisers and trained more than 2000 public officials.

Regionally, that means Fiji has a national climate adviser who has helped the country raise US \$512,000, with an active project pipeline of US\$66 million

It means a national climate finance adviser in Nauru who has helped to raise more than US\$8 million for vital projects

It means that the Solomon Islands has a national climate adviser who has helped to raise US\$ 5.9 million of funding, with an active pipeline of US\$104 million.

In addition, there are active pipelines in Tonga and Vanuatu worth nearly \$200 million.

This is extraordinary. It shows the value of Australia's contribution. And it shows the Commonwealth's ability to turn a cent into a dollar, and use it to deliver positive impacts for the people who need it most.

This is essential work in the face of the greatest universal challenge humanity faces.

But we do not simply live in the era of climate change - we live in an era of overlapping, interlinked and accelerating crises.

The world is under pressure - tightly bound by a tangled knot of crises spanning global systems.

The economic consequences of COVID-19.

Crippling debt, rising inflation and high interest rates.

Spiralling costs for food and energy.

And the tremors and insecurities of global conflict.

What **defines** our present predicament as unique is the lack of single causes and single fixes.

What makes it so **intractable** is the dilemmas it creates, where attempts to resolve one crisis worsens another, like when poverty reduction measures increase fossil fuel emissions.

Or where even the definition of a problem is contested, such as in conflict between nations, and there is no clear path to resolution.

How do we respond to these challenges? What role is there for the Commonwealth in the eye of such a storm?

It is clear to me that meeting this moment requires a level of international political and economic cooperation which is unprecedented in this century.

Yet they are manifest at a time when the multilateral system is under immense pressure.

Indeed, the challenges of the world contribute to that pressure.

The world feels as though it is fracturing and, in an increasingly polarised environment, people are anxious about the capacity of governments and international institutions to provide the leadership and action required.

It is in exactly a context like this that the Commonwealth can mobilise its greatest qualities.

We began as a group of eight - including Australia - brought together in the shadow of empire, after the end of the Second World War and at the beginning of the Cold War, to 'bring a touch of healing' to relationships which were changing.

Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II herself observed a Commonwealth which "*bears no resemblance to the empires of the past - an entirely new conception, built on the highest qualities of the spirit of man: friendship, loyalty and the desire for freedom and peace - and an equal partnership of nations and races.*"

She was right.

Today, the Commonwealth stands as a voluntary association of 56 independent sovereign states, spread across five continents and six oceans.

At 2.5 billion people, 60% of whom are under the age of 30, we encompass around a third of the world's population.

We comprise developed and developing economies; island states and land-locked states; some of the largest populations of any country in the world, and some of the smallest; five of the 10 fastest growing cities on the planet, and some of the most remote indigenous communities.

33 of our members are small states, of which 25 are Small Island Developing States.

15 of our 56 member states retain constitutional links with the Monarchy of the United Kingdom. 36 are Republics, five have Monarchies of their own, and four were never part of the British Empire.

This includes Togo and Gabon, who joined the Commonwealth at our Heads of Government Meeting in Kigali last year.

Each is different. With different history, and different experiences.

But each is **united** in active, engaged membership of the modern Commonwealth, bound by the blend of practical advantages, common interests shared values which makes the Commonwealth unique.

And arising from all this is an essential truth: we are the world's largest association democratic nations - and the most significant grouping of countries in the history of the world - which is bound, above all, by values to which we all aspire: the values enshrined in our ground-breaking Charter.

The strength of our combination of advantages, interests and values shines in the fact that, with a multilateral system under strain, **the Commonwealth as a multilateral organisation is growing precisely because of what we stand for and what we can deliver.**

The Commonwealth provides a continuous connection between countries separated by geography.

In no other multilateral setting can Australia engage so regularly, so closely, and so comprehensively, to complement its partnerships in the Pacific with collaborations in Africa, or the Caribbean, or Europe or North America.
We have difficult conversations in a constructive spirit;

And we face the world's challenges together.

It is unique in the world - and it has been a hallmark of the Commonwealth.

At difficult times, we have demonstrated collective resilience, and we have been consistently able to look crisis and wrong in the face and call it what it is.

You can see it in our collective refusal to turn a blind eye to apartheid.
You can see it in the ground-breaking Lusaka Declaration on Racism in 1979

You can see it in the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment in 1989;

In Leaders Statement on Climate Change ahead of the Paris Agreement in 2015;

And in the landmark reference to 'loss and damage' in the 2022 CHOGM Communique, which set the tone for global agreement at COP27.

You can see it in the Commonwealth Charter, which celebrated its tenth anniversary last month.

And you can see it in our continuous, tireless fight for the small, the vulnerable and the marginalised.

These interventions have been ground-breaking, and often shifted the dial.

So today, in the face of the challenges which are thrust upon us, we must have the courage to break new ground and shift the dial again.

The collective resolve of Commonwealth Heads of Government to do exactly this was there for all to see in Kigali last year.

And the credibility of leadership lies in our programme of practical action, support and assistance for our member states - which is more comprehensive today than at any other time in our 74-year history.

From land and ocean, to justice, growth, and the protection of democracy, the Commonwealth's programme in 2023 is more comprehensive and impactful than it has ever been.

Driven by, and working for, our member states - including Australia.

Trade costs between Commonwealth countries are 21 per cent lower, on average, compared to trading with non-Commonwealth members.

And intra-Commonwealth investment has increased by nearly 30% in the last seven years.

This is the Commonwealth today, in 2023. Our role, our relevance, our value.

Our principled and practical response to the grave challenges we all face.

But there is another dimension to this argument.

The facts of the world today show us that business as usual is not enough.

It is not enough to deal with the challenges we are aware of, and not enough to deal with the new and unexpected challenges which will inevitably come our way.

We cannot simply manage the impact of problems.

We must seek to transcend, and to build a better future, driven by a combination of hope, hard-headedness, and confidence in humanity's ingenuity.

I am talking now about the Commonwealth of tomorrow.

During the last decade, the proliferation of challenges I have been describing has too often diverted our attention from a technological revolution which is dizzying in its pace and scale.

More people are connected to the internet than ever before.

More people rely on digital services than ever before.

New technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, cloud computing, internet of things, have become critical to nearly every sector.

They are driving profound changes in our daily lives, changing how we consume, produce and work; how societies connect, and how businesses are run.

By the end of this decade they will have completely transformed our societies and our economies - so they will inevitably change our politics too.

But if you talk to most public policymakers about the technological revolution right now, and you will probably find yourself in a conversation about how to effectively regulate Facebook

(or a debate about whether Elon Musk is doing a good job at Twitter).

These conversations are important, but they miss the wider point.

What we should be talking about - what we can no longer avoid talking about - is how we can harness the extraordinary potential of technological transformation to drive positive change:

in healthcare;

in education;

in transport & infrastructure;

in governance, trade and justice;

to make our societies more equal, more fair, healthier, more prosperous, more resilient and more secure.

We must talk about how it is only through the development and deployment of new technologies - at scale - that we can achieve carbon neutrality and avoid the worst affects of climate change.

And we must talk about how we can close the digital divide, and close the gaping skills gap, to ensure the benefits of technological change are felt fairly, and equally, by every region, every country, and every citizen.

Those of you who know the Commonwealth will understand that, while we have so often set an example to the world, we do not shout about ourselves.

And those of you who know me will understand that I try to lead with humility.

But this is a subject on which I am particularly (and unashamedly) strident.

The Commonwealth must lead, is leading, and will continue to lead this vital work.

We are the only leading multilateral organisation which is properly equipped to tackle challenges and navigate change in an action-orientated way.

There can be no greater change than this. Australia can be proud to be part of it - and can take heart that, as with all our action, it flows directly from the mandates of our Heads of Government.

In Kigali last June, they focused on the transformative potential of technology for every sector, and committed to addressing both the digital divide and the digital skills gap.

By the end of November, Commonwealth Law Ministers, meeting in Mauritius, had agreed a paradigm shift in the delivery of justice throughout the Commonwealth, adopting a new framework which harnesses technology and digitalisation to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow: from the use of online hearings to clear caseload backlogs, to the use of artificial intelligence to deliver dramatic improvements in the speed, access to and quality of legal resolution.

Soon, Commonwealth Health Ministers, Trade Ministers, Finance Ministers and Education Ministers, will each meet to debate and adopt similar shifts in their own sectors and collective efforts.

And through our partnerships with Simplilearn and Intel, we will be training tens of thousands of young people across the Commonwealth in digital skills, equipping them with the knowledge and confidence they need not just to survive in a technological revolution, but to thrive in it - indeed, to shape it.

By the time we reach the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, next year in Samoa, we will have developed the world's most dynamic and comprehensive political and economic framework for harnessing the best of technological change to deliver real results for all of our 56 countries, and 2.5 billion people.

A Smart Commonwealth. A connected Commonwealth. An innovative, successful Commonwealth.

Because of our natural advantages, and unique blend of strengths, the Commonwealth is uniquely placed to achieve this:

Because of our shared interests.

Because of our practical similarities: in language, common law, regulatory coherence, business procedures, and large and dynamic diaspora communities.

And, above all, because of the values to which we all aspire.

These values of peace and justice, of tolerance, respect and solidarity - and our role as the foremost international champion for small and vulnerable states - are an enduring responsibility.

They express a vision for the world that will outlast all of us.

They make us different.

They make us special.

I believe profoundly that, taken together, they mean that the Commonwealth today, in 2023, is not simply a part of the international system, it is a beacon within it.

That is the global family which Australia is not just part of, but it central to.

In difficult times, our values must shape the choices we make.

Because values matter most when they are being put to the test.

So in this year Commonwealth Year of Peace, and this Commonwealth Year of Youth, the time has come: not only to renew our commitment to our shared values, but to bring those values alive in our work.

There can be no better opportunity that the urgency of this moment, today, to ensure that the principles we aspire to represent the lived experience of all - now and for generations to come.

We need the whole Commonwealth Family, together with the international system and the wider world, working for our common future. Australia can be proud of this. Australia can be motivated by it. And there is no doubt that Australia can be a driving force within it.

You have shown before that it is possible to inspire, and to be inspired.

You have proved that the things which really matters as a country is the example you set.

Every nation which is part of the Commonwealth, and committed to its values, can be strong and free; prosperous and fair; and a force for good in the world.

This is true for Australia.

It is true for Jamaica, for India, for Canada, the UK, Nigeria, South Africa and Singapore.

It is true for Nauru, for Vanuatu, for Lesotho, for Guyana and The Maldives.

It is true for every Commonwealth country, and every Commonwealth citizen.

This is what Australia brings to the Commonwealth, what the Commonwealth brings to Australia, and what we both - together - bring to the world. It is our promise; it is our responsibility; it is our opportunity.

And it is my unshakeable priority as Secretary-General.

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.