

**REMARKS BY LORD (TARIQ) AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON,
MINISTER OF STATE FOR THE COMMONWEALTH, AT A
RECEPTION ON THE OCCASION OF THE 150TH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH
SOCIETY AT LANCASTER HOUSE, WEDNESDAY, 17
OCTOBER 2018**

Introduction

Your Royal Highness, Lord Howell, Excellencies, Secretary General, distinguished guests.

I am delighted to welcome such a large gathering to Lancaster House this evening to celebrate the Royal Commonwealth Society's 150th anniversary. It is a significant achievement by any yardstick.

Its longevity is a credit not only to the dedication of the thousands of members, fellows, and supporters who have passed through its doors. It is also a testament to their vision and energy, which has enabled the organisation to evolve and adapt to changing times.

Your discussions over the last few days demonstrate that the Society remains forward-thinking and purposeful.

The Summit and UK as Chair in Office

During our time as Chair in Office, the United Kingdom is also determined to be both those things.

The Heads of Government Meeting in April brought 46 Commonwealth Heads together in this very building for the biggest summit of its kind in British history.

The summit demonstrated the unity of the Commonwealth: a unity based on shared history, shared values and traditions, and most of all, our common future.

It was a great success, with leaders agreeing a range of actions to build a Commonwealth that is fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous and more secure.

The challenge for us all now is to maintain that momentum and ensure that the Commonwealth lives up to the expectations we have built up.

I think we all know that we will only be successful if we continue to work together, as one Commonwealth, and draw on all of our combined strengths.

That is why I always talk about the three pillars of the Commonwealth – the member states, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the Commonwealth's organisations and networks. They all have a part to play in ensuring that the Commonwealth realises its enormous potential.

This third pillar is no more clearly exemplified than by the Royal Commonwealth Society, which this week has brought together representatives from 37 of its branches, from all corners of the world.

This is no mean feat. The fact that the majority of you have travelled great distances, at your own expense, reflects the great value that members see in our wonderful and diverse Commonwealth, and it also demonstrates their personal commitment to ensuring it succeeds.

Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cornwall is also someone who has shown great personal commitment to the Commonwealth over many years. She has done so both in the important supporting role she plays to the Prince of Wales - who in April was of course formally named as the future Head of the Commonwealth - and in her own right.

The Work of the RCS

The Society has had a busy few days.

I welcome in particular the significant emphasis you continue to place on youth engagement and participation.

Young people are not only the future, but also the present, with an essential stake in the direction of this organisation.

I believe there is much more that Commonwealth countries – including my own – can do to engage, involve and enthuse them about what we can achieve together.

The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition is a great way to do all three.

I am hugely excited about meeting the winners when they collect their awards at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace next month.

The theme of this year's competition - "Towards a Common Future" – mirrored the leaders' CHOGM agenda, and it shows how the different pillars of the Commonwealth complement, support, and enrich one another, so that we are all more able to achieve our common goals.

I saw the same unity of purpose when Commonwealth business people, civil society members, youth advocates, and member states all come together in April for Commonwealth Big Lunches, of which Her Royal Highness was patron.

And the same sense of shared purpose is also driving the Royal Commonwealth Society's ongoing work to protect the world's precious forests through The Queen's Commonwealth Canopy. So far 42 Commonwealth countries have created new woodlands or dedicated indigenous forest to this initiative.

Wouldn't it be great if we could get all 53 member states on board? The UK Government stands ready to work with the Royal Commonwealth Society and its partners to achieve that ambition.

Conclusion

Before I pass the floor to Lord Howell, I want to wholeheartedly commend everyone - past and present - who has had a hand in making the Royal Commonwealth Society such an essential part of the Commonwealth family.

I am confident that our successors will be gathering like this for decades - indeed centuries - to come to mark many more milestones and successes.

Let us continue to work together. Let us continue to champion the Commonwealth, and showcase the benefits it brings to all its citizens, and as a force for good in the wider world.