

**Speech by H E Saroja Sirisena, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka at the Carlton Club  
for The Conservative Foreign & Commonwealth Council (CFCC)  
on 12 January 2022**

***Sri Lanka, the Commonwealth and Global Britain***

I wish to begin by thanking the Patron and the Chairman of the Conservative Foreign & Commonwealth Council (CFCC) Lord Taylor of Holbeach and Lord Rami Ranger for the invitation extended to me to address you this evening. The theme I have chosen for my address is *Sri Lanka, the Commonwealth and Global Britain*.

As you know, relations between Sri Lanka and the UK are bound by historical ties dating back centuries. In recent times, these ties have been reinforced with the exchange of regular high-level visits, strong relations spanning political, trade & investment, and cultural spheres and most importantly, people to people contacts. Most recently President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Foreign Minister Prof G L Peiris visited the UK whilst Lord Ahamad of Wimbledon is scheduled to visit Sri Lanka shortly.

Sri Lanka - UK relations have expanded both bilaterally and in the context of Sri Lanka's membership in the Commonwealth. Sri Lanka being a founding member of the Commonwealth, attaches a great deal of importance to the values of the Commonwealth family and the close cooperation, solidarity and the unique Commonwealth spirit that it has created among its members.

Sri Lanka has pioneered certain Commonwealth projects recently and is proud of its role in championing the Mangrove Ecosystem Livelihood Action Group under the Commonwealth Blue Charter and pleased to have hosted its First Meeting in October 2019 with the support of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Sri Lanka has also dedicated a forest area of 10 hectares in Trincomalee District in honour of The Queen's Commonwealth Canopy Initiative.

We look forward to our active participation at the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations, CHOGM in Rwanda and the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham later this year.

With Brexit, I believe the relevance and importance of the Commonwealth has further increased. It has paved the way for the United Kingdom to strengthen its partnerships with Commonwealth nations. The Commonwealth is the crystallisation of commonalities of 54 countries, and it has thereby created a solid foundation that has been in existence for over 7 decades. This makes the Commonwealth a natural launch pad of Global Britain which Sri Lanka could be a significant partner from Asia.

Due the shared history of our two countries, there is compatibility in many spheres. This compatibility has not been achieved overnight but a result of policies adopted by successive Sri Lankan Governments to developing its human capital, one of its most valuable assets.

Sri Lankan value system does not differ from that of the UK. We follow the same traditions of democracy and rule of law. Sri Lanka is regarded as one of the oldest continuous democracies in Asia, with Universal Adult Franchise being extended since 1931, before its independence and far ahead of many other countries.

Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in the world that offers free education, free but quality education. We have a pool of educated human resources with transferable skills. We have a high literacy rate (92.5%) and high school enrolment ratio higher than most of developing countries and these indicators are on par with those of developed countries. One of the key features of our education system and examinations is that it is uniform across the country and does not vary geographically as in some countries in the region or globally. Our education system is compatible with that of the UK and it is the reason why those educated in Sri Lanka adapt to the UK education system and employment market with ease. Our human capital has proven its ability by excelling even with the modest resources available to them.

The UK is one of the most popular destinations for higher studies for Sri Lankan students. There are two British Council offices in Sri Lanka. We have for generations kept faith in education offered by the UK, continue to do so and want to see more Sri Lankans being educated in the UK. We also encourage British universities to enhance twinning programmes, establish affiliated colleges and explore opportunities of establishing overseas campuses catering to the Asia Pacific region. In this connection we believe that the UK can do much to assist the Commonwealth family by restoring certain concessions given to Commonwealth nations such as reduction of tuition fees at UK universities for students from the Commonwealth.

The UK's stated policy of promoting gender equality, working with women's rights organisations to tackle discrimination, violence and inequality that hold women back is very much aligned with Sri Lanka's goals in this sphere. Sri Lanka has been at the forefront of women's empowerment and a regional leader in girls' education and women's status in the society. It is gratifying to note that in Sri Lanka girls outnumber and outsmart their male counterparts in all fields except engineering and Information Technology.

Sri Lanka is making advances in science and technology sectors and its scientists are contributing to science and technology and innovation in other countries. The UK is a global leader in medical research, as demonstrated recently in the Oxford University/ AstraZeneca vaccine development. Research collaboration has already been established between Oxford University and Sri Jayewardenepura University. There is scope for further expanding this collaboration. There is also cooperation between our two countries in the field of climate change and renewable energy.

Three years after the UK created the National Health Service in 1948, Sri Lanka introduced its free health policy (in 1951). For us, healthcare is a priority. It's also a right that shapes the progress of the country and increases the quality of life of its people. The World Health Organisation has acknowledged that 'Sri Lanka has invested in a robust public health system, which ensures access to free health care for the population'. Sri Lanka's public health system is a model for many developing nations thanks to which Sri Lanka has successfully eliminated Lymphatic Filariasis as a public health problem and reduced the number of indigenous malaria cases to zero. It is also due to the efficient and effective COVID-19 vaccination programme implemented by Sri Lanka's public health system, with the assistance of other agencies that Sri Lanka has now been able to fully vaccinate 85% of the eligible population (over 16). We are ready to join the UK in their global initiatives to build health resilience for the benefit of all mankind.

Sri Lankans are working in the UK in sectors such as healthcare, financial services, education, hospitality and information technology. They already contribute to 'Global Britain'. I need to highlight that more than 6000 Doctors educated in Sri Lanka are contributing to the NHS. We do not see our professionals coming to the UK as a brain drain but an essential element of the long-standing people to people contact between our two countries as well as Sri Lanka's contribution to the UK's role as a science, technology and innovation superpower.

The economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic that has engulfed the world for more than 2 years have presented host of challenges for all nations and converting these challenges into opportunities is critical. Despite these challenges Sri Lanka has elevated from 94 (in the year 2020) to 87 in the year 2021 in country ranking in Sustainable Development Goals.

In terms of Sustainable Development Goals, Sri Lanka is 'On track or maintaining SDG achievement' in three SDGs: 'No poverty', 'Quality education' and 'Climate action'. And also 'Moderate improving' can be seen from the categories of 'Zero Hunger', 'Good Health and Well Being', 'Clean water and sanitation', 'Affordable and clean energy', 'decent work and

economic growth' and 'Industry innovation, and infrastructure'. We are ambitious to obtain 75% of our energy sources through renewable energy by 2030 and make Sri Lanka a carbon neutral country by 2050. Sri Lanka along with the UK and several other countries became co-lead of the energy compact for 'No New Coal Power' to commit to halt construction of new coal-fired power plants by the UN Climate Summit COP26 to keep the 1.5-degree Celsius goal within reach.

As proven by the SDG achievements, Sri Lanka is championing climate action. Sri Lanka also pioneered in the Colombo Declaration on Sustainable Nitrogen Management. Sri Lanka's progressive initiatives to mitigate climate change impacts, also includes President H.E. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's initiative "Towards a Green Socio-Economic Pattern with Sustainable Solutions to Climate Change".

In the multilateral context, our two countries could demonstrate benefits of cooperation by establishing common approaches and influencing multilateral debates in areas of seeking multilateral solutions for climate change and biodiversity loss and trade related matters since both countries being founding GATT members are committed to strengthen the global trading system (WTO).

Sri Lanka too envisions prosperity through its policy framework 'vistas of prosperity and splendour' which focuses on an efficient country free from corruption, a safe and a secure country for all, a productive citizen and a happy family, people-centric economy, a technology-based society, new approach in national spatial system, a sustainable environmental policy, a righteous, disciplined and law-abiding society, and "dialogue with the village" approach.

As you may be aware, Sri Lanka is currently facing an economic crisis as an immediate impact of the Covid pandemic and the decrease in exchange earning sources such as remittances by expatriate workers, tourism and the apparel industry. However, we are doing the best we can to come out of the crisis. We are a nation that has overcome challenges successfully and resiliently. It has been proven throughout history; the most recent ones being the end of the terrorist conflict in 2009 and building back after the huge devastation caused by Tsunami in 2004. Each time, to use the words of Prime Minister Johnson 'we have built back better'. I am certain that we can come out of this too and regain our position as one of South Asia's most resilient economies. For this, Sri Lanka's trade partnership with the UK would be of paramount importance. Because, Sri Lanka is the UK's 69th trading partner and for Sri Lanka the UK is its 4th with a total trade of nearly 1 Billion GBP.

Furthermore, the UK is also the second export market for Sri Lankan products and a main source for FDIs and inbound tourism. However, 70% of exports to the UK comprise of apparels and related products and opportunities for product diversification and exploring niche markets prevail. In the pursuit of policies in the vision statements of both countries, many opportunities avail in the fields of commerce and investments that could be pursued through partnership, collaboration, and economic cooperation.

Sri Lanka, being a beneficiary of the Enhanced Framework of the UK GSP Scheme and more robust economic partnership would enable both countries to harness the desired objectives in respective vision statements.

The UK's quest to be a digital and data hub, global leader in financial services and innovation & research; and Sri Lanka's interest to be the supply hub in South Asia which includes ICT, logistics services etc, are potential areas for investment and joint venture collaborations.

For the successful implementation of the Global Britain policy framework, the UK would need partners and Sri Lanka would be a natural and like-minded partner in this endeavour. This aligns with the UK's objective of deep engagements with Asia as a partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually beneficial trade, shared security and values.

I wish to conclude by drawing attention to Sri Lanka's Victoria project implemented with UK assistance. This project was inaugurated in 1978 and was commissioned in 1985 by Her Majesty the Queen. At that time, it was said to be the biggest project implemented by the UK in any foreign country, which was undertaken by the then Conservative government led by Prime Minister Thatcher. The magnificent Victoria Reservoir stands today as a symbol of Sri Lanka-UK friendship serving the electricity and irrigational needs of Sri Lanka. Since 1985, which is more than 35 years ago, the UK has not undertaken any such large-scale projects in Sri Lanka and we believe that time is now opportune, for the UK to consider a new project in Sri Lanka of the scale of Victoria which is reminiscent of the Thatcher era, particularly given that Sri Lanka will be commemorating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the independence in 2023.

On that note, I invite you to envisage another such golden era of Sri Lanka-UK partnership.

Thank you.