

Remarks at COL Board of Governor's Reception



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Chair, Members of the Board, Friends of COL, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very warm welcome to each one of you. Thank you for joining us this evening and I hope you're having a wonderful time. I am particularly grateful to the members of our Board for their warm support and for travelling vast distances from all corners of our Commonwealth.

We're holding this reception for the first time in Burnaby, since we relocated—last year our Board met just prior to the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in the Bahamas, where our new Strategic Plan 2015-21 was presented. It's an ambitious plan that seeks to demonstrate how learning can lead to sustainable development. One year into the plan and we're already beginning to see encouraging results—all the graduates of the diploma in sustainable agriculture in Samoa are in full-time employment; 4500 women in Tanzania have started agri-enterprises; and, the Eastern Caribbean States are now developing Open Textbooks: the Minister of Education, Antigua and Barbuda found that there was a 20% increase in maths scores when open textbooks were introduced in schools.

Thanks to additional contributions from Global Affairs Canada and DFAT, Australia, we have initiated an exciting project in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Mozambique and Tanzania under which 45,000 girls will have opportunities for secondary schooling and skills development that will lead to employment and entrepreneurship. As we know, investing in girls means investing in the sustainable development of our countries.

I'm sure that one of our founding fathers and the first Chair of our Board of Governors, Lord Asa Briggs would have been proud to see the growth and development of COL. A renowned historian, educationist and institution builder, Lord Briggs, whom we lost this year, wrote the report that led to the establishment of COL. He had brought a Yorkshireman's un-stuffy un-pompous and practical approach to his work and this has had a far-reaching influence on COL's own character and functioning.

COL's triennial conference, the Pan Commonwealth Forums, will be held in Kuala Lumpur this November. A regular highlight is the Asa Briggs lecture, which celebrates Lord Briggs' great contributions to education in the Commonwealth. Sir John Daniel, our former President, will deliver the lecture in Malaysia.

For the first time in 65 years, we have a woman Secretary General of the Commonwealth, the Hon Baroness Patricia Scotland. She has been unable to join us today and is represented by DSG Maharaj. Baroness Scotland has a number of key priorities, relating to youth, combatting violence against women and girls, and climate change, which have a close resonance with COL's own work.

The theme for the Commonwealth this year is 'an inclusive Commonwealth'. Even though our Commonwealth is scattered and far-flung, an inextricable connection binds us all—this goes beyond the ties of history or language—and is based on the shared human values of respect and understanding. Each Member State, no matter how big or small, rich or poor, has an equal voice and value. Our 'inclusive' Commonwealth must be a place where, as the poet Tagore said: 'the mind is without fear and the head is held high, where knowledge is free'. We at the Commonwealth of Learning believe that this is no utopian fantasy but a realizable goal through education and lifelong learning for all.

Thank you for your continued support.