

Lord High Commissioner's closing speech — General Assembly 2022

Rt Hon Lord Hodge

RIGHT REVEREND AND RIGHT HONOURABLE, pray be seated. The business for which the Assembly has been convened has now been completed. I congratulate everyone who has been involved in the arrangements in preparing for and carrying out the organisation of the Assembly for the efficient way in which the business has been conducted.

The organisation of a hybrid Assembly at a time when COVID still lurks has been a challenge, but your organisers have admirably risen to that challenge. I have regrettably contributed to that challenge by contracting COVID two weekends ago, having successfully dodged the virus despite travelling widely since last summer. The best laid schemes, as Robert Burns said, “gang aft agley”. I am very sorry not to have been available between Friday afternoon and Sunday afternoon and for the inconvenience which I have caused the organisers of the Assembly and my team at the Palace. I am also sorry for those who were invited to events at the Palace who discovered that those events were cancelled at short notice. The Purse-Bearer and I were acting on expert medical advice in an attempt to keep other people safe.

As a plea in mitigation – something an advocate knows about – I can say that I was only two days late. I contrast myself with George IV. When His Majesty visited Scotland 200 years ago, he was due to arrive on 10 August and was eagerly expected. Not being the most organised of monarchs, he did not set off from Greenwich until 10 August and arrived 4 days late. The comparison is, on reflection, not a very good plea in mitigation. I am getting rusty at advocacy.

I have greatly enjoyed hearing once again your debates. You have conducted your deliberations with dignity and grace, tackling difficult issues on which differing views are held in good faith. I should have liked to have heard more but have, as you know, been out and about on visits to charitable and public service organisations in Scotland.

Before describing those visits briefly, I wish to acknowledge the dedicated service to the Church of two individuals. George Whyte, as Principal Clerk, has, among so much else, guided the Church and the Assemblies through all the complexities created by the pandemic. It can have been no easy task but it is a task well done. John Chalmers, as Chair of the Trustees, has performed a vital task of financial stewardship, seeking to streamline the organisation of the Church to enable it to serve its mission in the localities. We, like

many churches, may now have limited financial resources. But we should not forget that the Church also has the unlimited resources of the Holy Spirit.

On Monday, we travelled to Crieff where I attended a lunch at Crieff Hydro for a group of local charities. I met the enthusiastic and active members of those organisations and learned about their work. I was struck by the energy and vibrancy of these, mainly local, initiatives which ranged from community support, assisting the families of prisoners, providing for the disabled, recycling things for further use, and many other initiatives. I also met prison officer cadets, including two impressive young women who explained their motivation as a desire to be of public service and to give something back to their society. They were inspiring.

We then travelled to the Auchlone Nature Kindergarten which was founded by Dr Claire Warden. The children learn about sustainable living, about nature and animals. The wood is their playground and they have hens and a frog pond. They were confident and engaging children, happy to engage with adults and to show us their domain. Our ADC on that visit was Captain Archie Nicholson. The children were greatly excited by his dashing uniform and silver sword and I was delighted to play a secondary role, at least in the eyes of the children, on that visit.

On Tuesday we travelled across to the old John Brown's shipyard to visit the Queen's Quay heat network facility, which is operated by Star Refrigeration and is supported by West Dunbartonshire Council. It is a district heating system taking heat from the water of the river Clyde and creating hot water at up to 80° Celsius in temperature to supply heating to the surrounding buildings and community. The important point is that the heat is produced with a 98% reduction in carbon emissions. The system is viable to be used in many cities in Scotland which are located on rivers if demand for the output can be guaranteed and the needed supply contracts can be put in place to ensure the viability of the plant. It is the far-sighted support of West Dunbartonshire Council which has got this project under way. The technology has the potential to contribute greatly towards meeting our climate goals if the vision is there within government and industry.

We then drove to Milton, the housing estate in the north-west of Glasgow which was built with great optimism at a time of full employment in the 1960s but which has suffered mass unemployment and multiple urban deprivation since the collapse of heavy industry in the 1970s and 1980s. The life expectancy on the estate is ten years lower than the average in Glasgow. And yet the estate has a beacon of ecumenical cooperation between the Church of Scotland's Colston Milton parish church, St Augustine's Roman Catholic church and St Andrew's Methodist Church. Local activists combine to support the community. This

support is essential as the community struggles with the cost of living crisis. We came away inspired by what we had seen and heard.

On Wednesday – yesterday – Her Grace and I met the chaplains to Her Majesty’s Forces after the General Assembly had so warmly shown our appreciation for their work. I then gave a short address at the General Assembly of the Free Church before we went to the Scottish Parliament to have lunch with the Presiding Officer, Alison Johnstone, and MSPs from each of the parties. I was struck by the interest in and appreciation shown by our hosts to the work of our church and other churches. In the afternoon, the Governor of Edinburgh Castle and the chief executive of the Scottish National War Memorial gave us a guided tour of the National War Memorial. I have visited the Memorial on several occasions in the past, but Her Grace and I were privileged to have an authoritative account of its creation and to see in detail its moving works of art created by a grieving but hugely grateful nation.

I wish to record my sincere thanks to the Lord Lieutenant of Stirlingshire, Alan Simpson, who stood in in my absence in visiting Friends of Scottish Settlers at Falkirk. The aim of the visit was to show that people care about asylum seekers and to thank the staff and volunteers for their dedicated work. At a time when the world is so unsettled and when violence has returned to Europe on a scale unprecedented in my life, I was very sorry to have missed out on this visit.

In carrying out my duties this year, I have been indebted to my suite. My three ADCS, Lt Conor McCarthy, RM, Captain Archie Nicholson and Flight Lt Jonny Mulhall, and Her Grace’s ladies in waiting, Rachel Barstow and Annie Duncan have charmingly and energetically assisted in looking after our guests and have accompanied us on our visits. I am indebted to my chaplain, the Rev Richard Frazer, for conducting our morning prayers and keeping me in order. To Tom, the indefatigable Purse-bearer, who has had to have a Plan B up his sleeve this year in face of the uncertainties of Covid, and to Jeffy Erskine, his assistant. My thanks to all who have worked so hard to enable people to enjoy the events which we have been able to have in the Palace. And finally, may I acknowledge my huge debt of thanks to her Grace, my wife, Penny, who has been and is my companion, my counsellor and my rock.

To all of them, and for the huge privilege of being Lord High Commissioner, I am deeply grateful.

I reach the end of my time here this year with strong memories. In particular, I have a strong sense of the energy and vibrancy of initiatives being taken at a local level, whether it be the Perthshire charities whom I met in Crieff or the ecumenical collaboration in service of the community in Milton. At a time when the Church faces challenges it should not forget

the opportunities which are emerging to do things in new ways by facilitating local initiatives. Most of all, what I will take away from this week is what a drug addict in Milton, who had no active connection with the church, said to the Rev Christopher Rowe on meeting him in the community: “You give us hope that God has not abandoned us”.

MODERATOR, may you and your wife, Linda, have a successful and rewarding year in office.

RIGHT REVEREND AND WELL-BELOVED, your labours are now at an end. You have concluded the business for which you assembled. May you return to your communities enlivened and enriched by your experience of this Assembly. In The Queen’s name, I bid you farewell.