

THE FOURTH PATSY ROBERTSON MEMORIAL LECTURE

Monday 14 October 2024 at 5pm

Delivered by TESSA SANDERSON CBE on
“Sport, Development and the Commonwealth”

1. Introduction

Chair, Baroness Scotland, the family of Patsy Robertson, Distinguished guests:

I'm delighted to be here in Marlborough House, the Commonwealth's magnificent international home, thanks to the generosity and vision of the former Head of the Commonwealth, the late Queen Elizabeth II.

It is also a particular honour to be delivering this, the 4th Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture, and to do so with members of her family among the guests. Patsy knew this building extraordinarily well. She worked here for nearly thirty years, being one of the earliest recruits to the Commonwealth Secretariat, shortly after it was established in 1965. Even after she retired from the Secretariat, in 1994, she was not about to retire from the Commonwealth itself, or from global issues. She worked unceasingly for a host of Commonwealth organisations and causes, not least the Commonwealth Association which she helped found in 2001 and which she guided as Chair until her death. In all this, she was never far away from Marlborough House. If her spirit is woven into the fabric of this venerable building, it is because she is also such a notable figure in the story of the modern Commonwealth.

Unfortunately, I never met Patsy, but happy to say I share a connection with her. We were both born in St Elizabeth parish in Jamaica, albeit some years apart. However, like Patsy, and so many of our compatriots, my family took the path out of our beautiful island home and chose a new life in the UK.

Like Patsy, I found a different world, one of snow and fog, but also of racism and hostility, even if there was also kindness and generosity.

My parents had settled in Wolverhampton, where both had found work, and it was one of the city's MPs, Enoch Powell, who in 1968 greatly increased racial tensions with his unforgivable 'rivers of blood' speech in Birmingham. I was barely a teenager, but I felt the massive hurt as we were singled out as people of colour.

Racism was rife and it was a difficult time for anyone with a black skin. This included my parents who sadly had to endure signs on houses for rent (NO BLACKS, NO DOGS and many more hurtful things). And, yes, I had my school uniform spat on and was called many cruel names. But my parents were always mindful of these happenings and taught us well about resilience and strength. It was something I never forgot.

2. My Life in Athletics

My childhood wasn't only about challenge – it was also about my fantastic PE teacher, Barbara Richards, opening the door to opportunity. It was she who spotted and nurtured the sporting talent within me.

It would lead to me to compete in six consecutive Olympic Games between 1976 – 1996 and would include achieving the Gold medal and the Olympic record in 1984, in Los Angeles: three Gold medals at the Commonwealth Games over the years; and winning World Gold and European silver medals too.

Once my time as an athlete had passed, I was pleased to give back what I could and help kids discover the talents within themselves. In 1993, I was chosen as the first woman to become Vice-Chair of Sports England, the largest grassroots charity for kids in sport in England.

Later, I started the first real sporting academy with selected sports coaches- Newham Sports Academy – to help identify youngsters in the local community to nurture their sporting talent while still in school in order to reach the next level. Over the years, we have had many successes with this programme, including at this year's 2024 Olympics in Paris.

And when London hosted the 2012 Olympic Games, I was delighted to be asked by the UK government to serve on the Board of the Legacy Team for London 2012. To my mind, the legacy of great sporting spectacles is all important for what it can provide to local communities in terms of investment in sporting and recreation facilities, and in encouraging future generations of athletes.

3. My time with the Commonwealth Games

Let me now say something about the Commonwealth and its Games.

At the start of my talk, I spoke about coming to England, and the West Midlands, when racism was widespread and when what was widely labelled the 'British' Commonwealth had only gradually begun to change into a multiracial body. I did not know at the time that a fellow Jamaican, Patsy Robertson, had begun working in this building, with others, in the new Secretariat to build a very different kind of Commonwealth.

A few years later, as an aspiring young athlete, I travelled to the 1974 Commonwealth Games in Christchurch, New Zealand. This was my first senior international competition, and I broke the British record in my determination to qualify. Although I came fourth in my event, I had made my mark in the world standings and my athletics journey had begun.

Thirty-eight Commonwealth nations and territories competed in Christchurch, and I mixed with many more athletes looking a lot like me. My country of birth, Jamaica, was eleventh in the medal table and five countries competed for the first time.

It was to be four years before I returned to the next Commonwealth Games, held in 1978 in Edmonton, Canada. On this occasion, I was happy to bring home Commonwealth Gold for England.

At the same Games, one of my heroes and a great friend, Sonia Lannaman, won two Gold medals, and a Silver. Sonia was a black sprinter who I had met when I first started my athletics career at Wolverhampton & Bilston AC. I remember seeing her run and so much wanted to be like her in the sporting arena. We shared many great sporting moments together and are still great friends to this day.

Now to one of the hazards of being an athlete. I can honestly say that any top sportsman or woman who has got to the top in their chosen field of sport without any form of injury is, or was, very fortunate.

I started doing the heptathlon in 1980 – and set a new British record. However, in 1981 a serious Achilles tendon injury forced me to sit out the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, which I watched from my hospital bed.

It took me a while, and a lot of work by my two greatly experienced coaches, to recover and build my performance levels back up. I returned to world class level competing in the 1983 World Championships in Helsinki, where the world record holder, Tiina Lillak, from Finland, won the Gold medal. My big rival, Fatima Whitbread, came second and I finished fourth, a position I still hate...

However, the 1984 Olympic Games was in sight – by now, with the whole body of athletics in the UK believing that Fatima was going to bring home the first Olympic throwing gold medal for Britain.

For my part, I knew that resilience doesn't fix anything that is already broken – but when used in the right way, it's about self-belief and positive thinking to bounce back strong. That was my aim going to the 1984 Olympics.

Los Angeles, forty years ago, is where I achieved my greatest triumph, winning an Olympic Gold medal and setting a new Olympic record. It is still historic – no male or female has ever won an Olympic throwing gold medal for Great Britain. As the late Ron Pickering said during his TV commentary that day: "You know it, she knows it .. the Gold medal is hers – and that's history!" I can tell you, it was music to my ears.

When I heard it, I still remember every moment vividly and my feelings of pride- in what I had achieved for Great Britain, for my family and friends but also for black women athletes in showing what was possible – remain immense.

Two years later, I was back at the Commonwealth Games, this time in Edinburgh, here in the UK. Although Scotland's capital and people were wonderful hosts, the Games were hit by a major boycott by Commonwealth countries protesting against Margaret Thatcher's opposition to sanctions against *apartheid* South Africa. The Games suffered financially, and the City of Edinburgh was left with longstanding debts which took the corporation years to clear.

But I was at the Games to compete and to do the best I could. This was my second Commonwealth Gold medal and my second biggest win and my second biggest win over Fatima, my British rival on the world stage.

When I lost out at my first Commonwealth Games in 1974, I cried and my team manager came over to me and said, unsympathetically: “What are you crying for? Just get back at ‘em”. That’s the best thing she could have done for me. From that day, I vowed I would return to New Zealand and win.

Well, in 1990, that’s exactly what I did in my final Commonwealth Games in Auckland, New Zealand. It was my third Commonwealth Gold.

It was now sixteen years since my first Commonwealth Games and this unique sporting forum was enjoying happier times, with fifty-five nations and territories represented and the sporting world beginning to admire the Games and the individual performances it encouraged.

A week after the Games ended, the world was amazed and excited to see the great Nelson Mandela finally emerging from prison, hand in hand with Winnie, walking into freedom and into South Africa’s new democratic future. It was a moment which would lead to the end of *apartheid*; South Africa’s return to global and Olympic sport; and the election of Mandela as the first black President of a non-racial and democratic South Africa.

Forgive me for spending some time reminiscing about my personal experiences of the Commonwealth Games. But I do so for a reason. The Commonwealth Games is currently facing an uncertain future. Last year, in an unprecedented move, the State of Victoria, in Australia, and due to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games, announced that it was no longer prepared to do so, and was pulling out.

Naturally, this was not only a considerable shock for all involved, but it presented the Commonwealth Games Federation with the formidable task of finding a replacement host in a rapidly shrinking timescale. In September, it was announced that the great Scottish city of Glasgow was ready to host a re-purposed 2026 Commonwealth Games. If so, I am very positive that Glasgow, as Scotland did in my time of competing and as I experienced in 2014, will host another exciting Commonwealth Games showcasing some of the world’s best athletes.

However, those months of uncertainty inevitably led to media coverage of a familiar kind.... What was the point of the Commonwealth Games? Surely it was neither one thing nor the other – neither a universal, elite sports event, nor a regional championship.

And then there was some of the familiar charges, such as ‘this Commonwealth is no more than an imperial hangover, fostering neo-colonial delusions.’? And so on.

Well, please allow me to answer that...

As a supporter of the Commonwealth, a child of the Commonwealth, and a believer with all other Commonwealth Games’ participants past and present: we believe in the unique value of the Commonwealth Games and the great pathway it has prepared for many to achieve success in sport.

4. A future for the Commonwealth Games

SO, does the Commonwealth Games have a future? I believe it does, and for the following three reasons:

First, while the Commonwealth Games is not universal and therefore does not include major sporting nations, like China and the United States, the sporting talent it brings together across the world still allows athletes to excel at the highest level. As I mentioned, the Games provided me with my first opportunity to compete at a senior level and it remained an important part of my sporting calendar throughout my career. World records (as well as Commonwealth records) are regularly broken (four at Birmingham in 2022 and nine at Glasgow in 2014). Indeed, competing in the Commonwealth Games created the opportunity for me to succeed at the highest level and I grabbed it with both hands.

Equally so, I have rubbed shoulders with the stars of numerous sports over the years who have come to compete at the modern Commonwealth Games. For example, Usain Bolt, after his record-breaking, three Gold medal haul at the 2012 London Olympics, went to Glasgow for the 2014 Commonwealth Games. There he was part of Jamaica's 4 x 100m relay team, winning Gold and setting a new Commonwealth record. There have been many other legends of sport at the Games, and I can tell you that every athlete loved every minute spent at the Games.

Second, the Commonwealth Games has been a ground breaker in creating a fully inclusive sporting event. Many Commonwealth participants come from small states and territories, and the Commonwealth Games provides an opportunity to showcase the talent, experience and expertise of their athletes and coaches alike.

A good example is St Lucia, from the Eastern Caribbean, which first sent a team to the Commonwealth Games in 1962. The country's first Commonwealth medal, a Bronze, came in 2002 at the Manchester Games. Further Bronze medals were won in 2010 (at New Delhi) and in 2014 (Glasgow). St Lucia won a Commonwealth Gold medal in 2018, at the Gold Coast in Australia, and a Silver at the last Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, in 2022. This year, at the Paris Olympics, St Lucia won its first Olympic medals, with Julien Alfred winning Gold in the women's 100m and Silver in the women's 200m.

The Commonwealth Games has also steadily advanced women's sports, with women's athletic events introduced in 1934. Four years later Decima Norman, an Australian, won five gold medals at the Sydney Games.

In the 1960s, Dawn Fraser, also representing Australia, had unparalleled success in swimming events. In 1990, at the Auckland Games, I well remember a young Aboriginal athlete, Cathy Freeman, winning a Gold medal in the 4 x 100m relay, and thereby pioneering the inclusion of indigenous peoples in the Games also. At the last Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, in 2022, more medals were awarded to women than to men, for the first time in the history of a major multi-sport event.

Perhaps the most dramatic advance in inclusivity came with the full integration of para sport within the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games. This meant that there was no segregation

in ticketing for para-sports events, and medals won in para-sports contributed to the relevant nation's tally in the same way as for any other event.

Likewise, the Commonwealth Youth Games, for 14–18-year-olds, are now staged every four years, most recently in Trinidad and Tobago in 2023.

So, the Commonwealth Games is about athletic excellence, it is about inclusivity, but it is also, **third**, about fraternity and community.

The Commonwealth is sometimes described as a network of networks. One of its characteristics is the ease which comes from sharing not just a connection between nations but between peoples also, based on a common language, shared traditions and, above all, common values. That is particularly so of sport where the Commonwealth Games is a celebration of our unity, but which also reveals the amazing kaleidoscope of cultures, talents and individuals that reflect our rich diversity as a global network.

That feeling of fraternity is, I hope, felt by our athletes, by our spectators (whether at sports events or watching the Games by global television) and by everyone of the staff and volunteers involved. The most recent Games, in Birmingham, saw a surge in visitors to the city; nearly one million young people engaged with the Games either through volunteering or in associated programmes; and 22,380 full-time equivalent years in employment created in delivering the event. The city and its communities also saw a 27% increase in foreign direct investment projects. Overall, the Games generated an additional £1.2 billion in goods and services, almost half in the West Midlands itself.

5. Concluding remarks

Like the Commonwealth, the Games has undergone many changes and challenges over the years. It has survived, adapted and re-made itself to be fit for the new age. Re-making and re-setting the Games for the long term is now the task and I wish the Commonwealth Games Federation all the very best, and every success, in that important mission.

Thank you for asking me to deliver this important lecture – and long may the memory and example of Patsy Robertson inspire us in the future. Thank you.