

Statement at the Annual UK-Bhutan Society Dinner
The Charterhouse, London, 21st October 2016

Sir Simon Bowes Lyon, President of the Bhutan Society of the United Kingdom,
Michael Rutland, Chairman,
Andrew Sutton, Vice President and Secretary,
Officers and Members of the Society,
Fellow Bhutanese,
Dear Friends,

Kuzuzangpola!

It is a great pleasure to be here for what in fact is my first visit to the United Kingdom. Even though I was posted for some years at Bhutan's Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, and even though I schemed on many other occasions with your Chairman, I never made it across the Channel.

I am so pleased that the Bhutan Society has provided me with an excellent reason for a visit to a country which has had such an historic relationship with the Kingdom of Bhutan - a relationship older than that of any other nation in Europe.

It is a privilege to be at your 24th Annual Dinner here in this ancient building of The Charterhouse which itself has such a distinguished history stretching back many, many, hundreds of years. As we hear earlier today during the guided tour, Queen Elizabeth the First spent a night here when she returned to London to be Crowned Queen. I doubt very much if she had ever heard of the remote and then isolated nation called Bhutan and might, if her spirit is still in these walls, be a bit surprised to hear an Ambassador of Bhutan speaking in this ancient hall.

However, today, thanks in no small part to the work of the Bhutan Society of the United Kingdom, Bhutan is quite well known here.

And thanks to your Chairman who has been awarded Bhutanese citizenship by His Majesty the King and who has now been living in Bhutan for a good number of years, the Society is well informed of developments there. At the risk of repeating what you may have already heard from him at the Society's Annual General Meeting in early October, please allow me to highlight some significant national events this year.

We the Bhutanese people had extra reason to celebrate the lunar New Year this year as we welcomed the birth of HRH the Gyalsey Jigme Namgyel Wangchuk on 5th February this year.

I believe that the British public may know our beloved Gyalsey, as the media here were kind enough to bestow upon him the title of cutest royal baby, officially dethroning Prince George.

To commemorate the Royal Birth and two other significant events of this year, namely the 400th anniversary of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's arrival in Bhutan, and the birth year of Guru Padmasambhava in the Fire Male Monkey Year, which comes only once in a 60 year cycle, the historic Drugkyal Dzong in Paro is being re-built. The wonderful photos of Drugkyal Dzong taken by Jean Claude White during his visit to Bhutan in 1905 are an important reference for the re-construction. I believe that if he were alive today Jean Claude White would have been present at this dinner. He was one of the earliest British friends of Bhutan, presenting Bhutan to the British people and the world in an extremely positive way, and setting the record straight from an earlier report from the year 1890 which stated, & I quote:

"No one wishes to explore that tangle of jungle-clad and fever-stricken hills, infested with leeches and the pipsa-fly, and offering no compensating advantages to the most enterprising pioneer. Adventure looks beyond Bhutan. Science passes it by as a region not sufficiently characteristic to merit special exploration"

Bhutan is of course now even better known in the UK after the immensely successful visit to Bhutan in April by Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. It was an honour and a pleasure for Bhutan to receive The Duke and Duchess, who have so much in common with our King and Queen. We hope that this visit will further strengthen the warm and friendly relations between the UK and Bhutan. We thank the Society and in particular your Chairman, in his capacity as Honorary Consul of the UK in Bhutan, for having contributed to the success of the visit.

We in Bhutan, and in particular at the Royal Bhutanese Embassy in Brussels, are well aware of the important work done by the Bhutan Friendship Societies around the world. My colleagues and I were delighted to be a part of the 8th Meeting of the Pan-European Bhutan Societies in Greece a couple of weeks ago, where 50 members of 14 friendship societies from 12 countries were present. I believe we have to thank the Bhutan Society of the UK for this, as it is you who took the initiative to bring all the European Bhutan Societies together at the first meeting, sixteen years ago.

The Bhutan Society of the UK was perhaps the first of the European Societies, and I note that next year it will celebrate its twenty fifth Birthday.

During that quarter of a century, the Society has shown such warm hospitality to the over two hundred and fifty Bhutanese students who have studied in the United Kingdom, and I am delighted to see so many of the current cohort here at Dinner this evening as guests of the Society. The Society also continues to support many projects to help Bhutan and the Bhutanese people, and to create awareness of and goodwill for Bhutan in the UK. The Bhutan Society of the United Kingdom has proved itself to be a stalwart friend of Bhutan and its commitment to Bhutan is deeply appreciated by our King, Government and People. May I say a sincere “Kadrinche la”, thank you very much.

The bonds between the UK and Bhutan continue to strengthen, and we are delighted that now Bhutan receives every year a number of prestigious Chevening Scholarships from the British Government which allow carefully selected Scholars to study for Postgraduate Masters Degrees in the United Kingdom. And their travel to the United Kingdom is now facilitated by the opening some months ago by the Australian High Commissioner to India and the British Honorary Consul to Bhutan of a Joint Visa Application Centre in the heart of Thimphu.

And of course, as you would be aware, the Bard is back in Bhutan! My generation grew up with Shakespeare – from the lighthearted *Midsummer Nights’ Dream* to the interminable *King Richard II*, Shakespeare was a constant companion in our school and college days. I must say that I was quite shocked to learn that Shakespeare had been taken off the curriculum about a decade ago, and even protested informally to colleagues in the Education Ministry. Well that wrong has been righted. The Globe Theatre last year brought *Hamlet* to Thimphu for an expensive holiday, and I'm delighted to report that a few weeks ago the Minister of Education announced that Shakespeare, in the person of the *Merchant of Venice*, will once again be part of the School English Curriculum in Bhutan.

And finally let me express the heartfelt thanks of the Royal Government of Bhutan to all those officers of the Bhutan Society of the United Kingdom who give so generously of their time to ensure that the Society goes from strength to strength. Many of you have been friends of Bhutan for decades. The President of your Society, Lord Simon Bowes Lyon, visited Bhutan earlier this year – the 50th anniversary of his first visit to Bhutan soon after his wedding. With such long-standing friends, our friendship is built on solid foundations. I am also delighted that we have many other members, whose association with Bhutan may be more recent, but who share a common interest in Bhutan.

On behalf of my colleague, my husband and myself, I would also like to express personal thanks for your generous hospitality at Dinner this evening. I wish you well in the future, and look forward to working closely with you as well as to joining you at the celebration of your Twenty Fifth Anniversary next year.

Thank you for bearing with me through a longish speech – which could rival one of King Richard the Second’s soliloquies! Maybe I should blame it on the English language, in which we Bhutanese are so comfortable, and which is among the many ties that bind us so closely to the UK!

Thank you & Tashi Delek!