

Address by the President His Excellency the Governor, Dr Philip Rushbrook

Acknowledging my commission from Her Majesty The Queen, I welcome Honourable Members, officials and others in attendance at this first Legislative Council of the new term of office. I extend my congratulations on your election and look forward to working with all Councillors. Let me first take a moment to thank Gillian Francis, Carol George and the many other officials involved in conducting an efficient and well run General Election. I was delighted at the strong voter turnout, which was monitored for the first time, albeit remotely, by international observers from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I look forward to receiving their report shortly.

Today is the dawn of a Ministerial government and I hope the selection of the first Chief Minister will be achieved later in this session. Without exaggeration that moment will be a truly historic one for St Helena.

I also take this opportunity to thank warmly the public-spirited members from our community who worked voluntarily in the Governance Commission and later, on the public information programme ahead of the Consultative Poll and the more recent, Implementation Committee within the administration. Each worked diligently to define options and prepare workable arrangements for a Ministerial system. Their efforts and fair-minded deliberations were an essential and valuable part of the process that led to Legislative Council requesting the UK to amend the Constitution. Let us see today as the culmination of decades of debate and grasp the opportunity for a more clearly responsible, accountable and timely form of government.

Each Elected Member's role, albeit a ministerial one or a representational and scrutiny one, is a fundamental part of a cooperative government. One where differences can be debated, minds are open to alternative views and if a majority decision has to be made all Councillors can find it in themselves to support the mainstream will of Legislative Council. Pragmatism to overcome differences and acceptance of a majority view are at the heart of the democratic process.

Under the ministerial system, the public servants are also an integral part of the government. They provide the advice to Ministers on policies and implement the decisions Ministers take, within the framework of the Constitution, existing legislation and any other binding obligations. It is important each Minister establishes a positive and collaborative working relationship with their respective Portfolio Director and the Chief Secretary. Your success or otherwise is built upon reflecting on their advice and their steadfast execution of your decisions within the resources available.

The Ministerial system changes the nature of the role of the Speaker too. The way Legislative Council should operate; the creation and conduct of Scrutiny Committees and Question Time; and the transformed roles of Ministers and other Councillors, mean the Speaker's function has changed to a different and distinct leadership one. This is necessary to ensure Council business works efficiently, standing orders are upheld and the highest ethical standards expected of the Elected Members are maintained.

I would encourage the new Chief Minister to set out as soon as possible their vision for prosperity and the achievements they seek to deliver in their term of office. This vision is one element of the clarity and the taking of responsibility the general public have asked for. I caution against going backwards by setting up cumbersome ad-hoc committees and working groups or other ways that blur ministerial responsibility and accountability for decision-making.

Various serious financial, economic, legal and community issues confront the Island. It is essential they are addressed early in the life of this new Council for the good of St Helena. These issues will become apparent to Ministers and Councillors in their briefings from Portfolio Directors. The decisions to be made will be difficult and not necessarily popular with everyone but if these are not addressed then the services and prospects for our Island will be affected. It is your role from hereon and throughout the next four years to ensure on behalf of the people the future prosperity of St Helena can be secured. You carry a weighty burden.

In other places I have commented, like previous Governors, that the long term future for our Island lies in making more use of our own resources and expanding the business sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted this over the past 18 months. However, with 97% already double vaccinated and booster and youth jobs expected from the UK the first November flight, COVID should not be seen as a blanket reason to delay defining how the Island can move its prosperity forward. It is also clear the Island cannot rely on arguing for increased external budget support. The difficult fiscal situation post-COVID in the major economies of the world is putting pressure on public spending and borrowing. St Helena is not immune from these constraints and it will be the responsibility of the Chief Minister, and the wider Legislative Council, to ensure public finance decisions are affordable and create a thriving outlook for the territory.

My Office and Her Majesty's Government in the UK stands by to continue to assist the Government of St Helena. That said, I am encouraged to see Councillors are energised and ready to build a government whose policies balance the genuinely-held desires of the general public with the essential need to become less reliant on budgetary aid money.

You are all now the political government of St Helena, not only for those in the community that voted for you but also those who did not vote for you and those who could not vote.

I wish the Council success as it embarks upon its important business.

Thank you.

Governor Dr Philip Rushbrook
25 October 2021