

Speech by British High Commissioner at Islamabad Literature Festival

The British High Commissioner to Pakistan, Thomas Drew CMG, spoke at the Islamabad Literature Festival at Lok Virsa in Islamabad.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I start with an apology. I know that most of you have not come to the Literature Festival to listen to another bureaucrat. I am perhaps a newcomer to Pakistan, albeit one returning after an 8 year gap. But I already know that you can listen to bureaucrats at pretty much any other event in Islamabad for the other 362 days of the year. I will therefore keep my comments short.

“Before I start, though, I too would like to add my thanks to Ameena for inviting me here. The Oxford University Press is a great British institution with a long and proud heritage in Pakistan. Ameena has put on what promises to be a fabulous programme.

“I am looking forward to many things in the programme – as much to the bits which are new to me, as to those which are familiar.

“But, I confess, that one of my highlights will be the conversation between Hina Rabbani Khar and Anatol Lieven – two people for whom I have the greatest respect. Hina was one of Pakistan’s most talented Ministers here in my last tour. And Anatol’s “Pakistan – A Hard Country” is the book that our experts back in the Foreign Office recommend to anyone wanting to understand the country. That, frankly, made me suspicious; but now, more importantly, I hear that now too from my Pakistani friends.

“Anatol is right. Pakistan is, in many ways, a hard country. Personally I remain a great optimist. I would love to see Pakistan fulfil its huge potential – and perhaps become easier. But one of the reasons that this will happen is that this hard country has a soft side. And there is no better illustration of that soft side than events like this – a celebration of literature, art and culture more widely.

“You might say that I could make comments like this at arts festivals in many countries. Perhaps. But, to an outsider at least, literature seems here to have a special place in the national psyche. Back in the UK, we are this year celebrating 400 years since the death of William Shakespeare. But we don’t have a public holiday around it; and we certainly have no literary figure playing such a prominent role in the national consciousness as Allama Iqbal.

“Of course, soft does not have to mean lacking grit. I am only starting to know the works of a generation of contemporary authors who excite and challenge about Pakistan in equal measure. These are the people who shape attitudes. I am looking forward, for example, to tomorrow’s session with Bina Shah.

“In that camp, and as British High Commissioner, I should also mention the many joint British and Pakistani authors or British authors of Pakistani descent – from Tariq Ali and Mohsin Hamid to Qaisra Shahraz. Qaisra too will also be appearing at the Festival. They are making a mark in both of our countries.

“Finally, again wearing my High Commissioner’s hat, I should add that this is one of those areas of my work that is as pleasurable as it is critical to our interests. Some of you will know about the British Government’s education work in Pakistan: this is the biggest single element of the biggest development programme we have in any country in the world. There is no literature without literacy. But we are doing a lot more too. This year alone we are re-opening the British Council Libraries in Lahore and Karachi – with brand new modern buildings, facilities – and books. For those who can’t reach them, the British Council is also launching a Digital Library, which will offer access to over 5,000 journals, 30,000 books, films, discussions as well as a poem of the day, book of the week and film of the month. And, of course, we are delighted to support this weekend’s activities.

“We really are committed to the soft side of Anatol’s “hard” country.

“That then is probably enough from the bureaucrat. Thank you. Have a great festival”