

# Change for the better

By JEREMY LEFROY MP

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JEREMY LEFROY

has been MP for Stafford since 2010 and chairs the All Party Parliamentary Group on Tanzania. Previously he served as a Councillor in Newcastle-under-Lyme. A graduate of Kings College Cambridge, he and his wife Janet worked in Tanzania during 1989-2000. He founded and runs Equity for Africa, a charitable trust which seeks to alleviate poverty in a self-sustaining way by creating jobs through investing in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Africa. Recently he has served on the Conservative Party's Globalisation and Global Poverty policy group.

My first glimpse of Tanzania was when the United Republic was half its current age – 25 years ago in 1989 – as Janet and I approached the border at Namanga. The distinctive shape of Mt Longido appeared as we drove down from Nairobi with Eric Nkya who was to be my colleague for many years (and remains to this day a great friend).

Our luggage was full of basics such as toothpaste and soap. Janet remembered from her 3 months in Tanzania in 1983 as a medical student at Mvumi Hospital, near Dodoma, that very little had been available. We were assured that things had improved since then but decided to be on the safe side.

I will never tire of the journey between Namanga and Moshi, via Arusha with its vast plains and the glimpses of Mount Meru, higher than Matterhorn, and Kilimanjaro itself. I have done it in all weathers and with the road in very varied states of repair. It holds some very personal memories: driving through the dark later that year to catch a flight from Nairobi after hearing that my mother was dying or returning from Kenya with our ten day old son.

My work was in the coffee business while Janet led a community health education programme run by the Lutheran church. We thought that we would be there for two, or at the most four years. It turned out to be more than eleven. We grew to love Tanzania and its people through both good and difficult times.

Being in business in Tanzania in 1989 was not easy. The climate had changed somewhat under the government of President Ali Hassan Mwinyi and investment was encouraged. But there was a great deal of regulation, with licences being required for most activities.

The coffee industry was still dominated by the four major international exporters who had underwritten the bank facility by which Tanzania was able to import its oil. So only about a third of the coffee found its way into the auction system which was the only way in which my company could buy it.

Twenty five years later, the auction system is stronger, after many ups and downs, and the overall quality of Tanzanian coffee has improved substantially. The revival and expansion of washed Arabica coffee processing factories for smallholder farmers in Kilimanjaro, Arusha, Mbeya, Ruvuma and Kigoma has enabled them to produce coffee which rivals – and sometimes surpasses – that from the best estates.

The health system has also improved considerably since 1989, a period in which the population has more than doubled. Under-five mortality has fallen sharply. But there remains an acute shortage of medical staff. Janet was honoured to be involved in developing the community health courses at the new medical school in Moshi from 1997. There had been only one medical school in the whole country. Now we are seeing doctors who she and her colleagues taught taking a leading role in providing healthcare or themselves teaching the next generations of students.

In 1989, the weekly arrival of the KLM flight at Kilimanjaro airport was an event which attracted considerable excitement (including for my family, as the plane might be carrying family or friends for a visit). In that year, tourist numbers were 138,000. Now there are well over 1 million visitors a year and tourism makes a very substantial contribution to the economy.

In 1989, Tanzania was still a one-party state. We had the privilege of seeing people patiently queuing at the polling stations in 1995 to elect Benjamin Mkapa, the first President under the multi-party system. The fifth multi-party elections will be held next year. So far they have been keenly contested but generally peaceful. All have resulted in Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) retaining power. At some point in the future, it is likely that another political party will win and I am sure that the transition will, in true Tanzanian tradition, be peaceful.

The United Republic of Tanzania has in many ways provided a model to the world over the past 50 years. It brings together people speaking more than one hundred languages into a unified state speaking Swahili, while still embracing local traditions. It has seen a peaceful transition to multi-party democracy. It has sustained the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar despite tensions which could have broken it apart.

The next fifty years will be as challenging, probably more so. Growing inequality, extremism and terrorism all threaten stability across the world and Tanzania is no exception. Corruption is still a scourge which needs to be eradicated. I am reassured from the resilience and common sense of the Tanzanian people which has been so comforting to Janet and me over many years. But they will also need wise and far-sighted leadership which continues to bring them together rather than seeking to exploit differences. The same could, of course, be said of our own United Kingdom. **F**