**“Be that one”: How to create winds of change in an uncertain world**

*Why does history matter? In the 2025 Tacitus Lecture, the International Trade Centre's Executive Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton sets out why unity in the face of daunting global challenges is critical, now more than ever, and what it will take to get there. Drawing from examples across history of people, institutions, and movements that pushed for economic, social, and environmental progress, even at times of crisis and upheaval, she examines what the path towards a more just world can look like—and what it takes to “be that one” who seeks out that path, even against the odds.*

*[4721 words/32.5 minutes]*

I have to give a lot of speeches in UN settings and there is always protocol to be observed.

I don’t usually speak before groups called the Worshipful Company of World Traders, or for that matter to sixth form students, so I had to have my speechwriter research exactly how to address this audience today.

So, here it goes:

Lord Mayor; Master; Wardens; my Lords; Governor; Aldermen; Sheriff; Chief Commoner; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen;

Good evening and thank you to that wonderfully named Worshipful Company of World Traders for inviting me to give this year’s Tacitus Lecture.

It’s an event that, by its very reference to that famed Roman historian and by its location in Guildhall…

…where we can quite literally hear the echoes of centuries’ worth of history…

…we are reminded that we each have a role to play in shaping the world for those generations still to come.

To be here is both an honour and privilege. And it is also an immense responsibility, especially at times like these.

I want to start by being very honest with all of you. A few months ago, when Lars very generously extended this invite on your behalf, I was going to give a speech about global trade, about development, about inclusivity, about small businesses…

…basically, the bread and butter of my career and the 60-year journey of the half-WTO, half-UN institution that I lead, the International Trade Centre.

But a lot has happened in those few months and I’ve really struggled over the last several weeks. I feel that I have to bear witness and speak to what is happening around me.

I cannot, as I told my team, stand in the middle of a hurricane and talk about my pretty pink umbrella.

Or, as an ambassador wisely counselled me when I told him about this speech: he said, Pam, we live in these times for a reason, so do what your spirit tells you.

So that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Here’s what my spirit is telling me.

In recent years, particularly the last few months, we have witnessed not just a debate, but a full-frontal assault on what I – and because you’re here today, presumably many of you – stand for.

An assault on the very idea that exchange with the outside world brings prosperity. We have seen the spectre of trade wars emerge once more on the horizon, amid tariff announcements and retaliations that not only will disrupt global supply chains, but that will lead to greater inflation, greater costs of living, and greater hardship.

An assault on not just the future, but the whole idea, of helping others through overseas aid. Massive, swinging aid cuts that are translating to lost livelihoods, and in some cases—indeed, far too many cases—are also risking the safety and integrity of human life.

An assault on the institutions that have, through their respective mandates, sought to buttress the postwar world order for the past 80 years—institutions that matter deeply not just to the Global North, but to the Global South.

This triple assault is not just in, or from, one country. It’s a global movement against a whole way of thinking and against a whole group of people. A movement that is spreading across the world and taking root even in places where, for many decades, we took this consensus for granted.

These are times that are putting each and every one of us to the test. We need to believe what we see and stop gaslighting ourselves.

And we cannot—we must not—normalize what is happening right now: not the rhetoric, not the actions being taken, and not the impacts that these actions are having on people’s lives.

I have given my entire adult life to the idea that aid, trade, and global institutions are worth fighting for. It has not always been an easy idea to defend.

And it is not always easy doing so from the perspective of someone raised in the Global South, where too often we face an uphill climb to ensure that our value, our voices, and our experiences carry as much weight within these institutions as those from the Global North.

So, as the ambassador told me, yes: we live in these times for a reason.

Because each one of us is being tested.

And each one of us has the ability, and the responsibility, to do something that makes our world better.

To “be that one,” and to create winds of change in periods of uncertainty and anxiety.

Anxiety without purpose leads to paralysis. Paralysis gets you nowhere and helps no one.

I want to make it clear that even though the world seems to be tilting on its axis, in many ways we have actually been here before. And I can all but guarantee, we will be here again. And experience shows us, it’s what we do next that truly matters.

And what we do next must account for where we’ve already been and, more importantly, what we’ve learned.

Nobel Laureate William Butler Yeats— in his oft quoted poem “The Second Coming,”

Conjures up a time when “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” and describes a place where “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

And I am quoting it to you now because it’s a poem that is often invoked at times of crisis, or during periods of transition, periods where society faces a choice.

Periods where there are signposts warning us of what’s to come if we don’t act.

Periods where we face crossroads that will define not just our fates, but those of generations still to come.

And at this pivotal time in history we need to show that we are ready to bring our best, even when times appear to be at their worst.

We need to show how the ideals we have fought so hard for—equality, fairness, and sustainable development—remain the only path for putting our world on stabler footing.

So, in the hope that it helps to shake my occasional moments of paralysis – in the hope that it helps you strengthen your fighting spirit – I want to take this moment to share with you a few things that I am fighting for and hope that it inspires you to enter the arena if you aren’t already there.

**First and foremost, we have to fight for the idea that trade can be transformative**. And not only transformative, but that it is fundamentally a human story. In a sense, this is one of the great tragedies of the timing of this assault on trade, because it came precisely at a time when there was a serious global conversation happening about how we could reset the terms of global trade, especially between Africa and the rest of the world.

Today, trade, once the conveyor belt of human misery, is now becoming—finally—a force for righting injustices and championing the voices of those it once marginalized.

At its most horrific, trade has been a form of devastating oppression, terror, and brutality, as we saw with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

But at its most hopeful, trade can help bring diasporas back together that trade itself had once torn asunder. In other words, trade can be an expression of the values we hold as a society, a reflection of the choices we make and the legacies we leave behind.

A century ago, Marcus Garvey from Jamaica championed the Black Star Line, with the vision of helping fix what trade had once so painfully broken.

It was a shipping line that, for three years, brought products from Black businesses in the Americas and the Caribbean to Africa…

…traversing back across that harrowing Middle Passage, but now with the goal of creating a fairer, more prosperous economy for the descendants of those that the trans-Atlantic slave trade had once ravaged.

It was the right idea, but one that had not yet found its time.

For want of the right ecosystem—and in the absence of a long overdue awakening—the Black Star line stopped running in 1922.

But Marcus Garvey’s vision didn’t die.

After the postwar years, independence movements across Africa and the Caribbean became one of the defining features of the 1950s and 1960s.

And with independence came the first serious conversation about how to change the terms of trade between the Global North and Global South.

And those years followed with calls in the 1970s for the creation of a new international economic order, premised on equity—advocated by the likes of Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley and Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, and famously set out in a UN General Assembly declaration in 1974.

Then came trade agreement after trade agreement, as developing economies tried to undo the economic harm of centuries of colonial exploitation. Some were more successful than others—and many remained more aspirational than transformational.

But then, four years ago, 54 African countries announced the official launch of trading under a new treaty known as the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Now this isn’t the first agreement to propose a major regional economic integration initiative, with the promise that sustainable development would follow.

But it is the treaty that has the greatest potential for achieving the radical change that it promises. And we have a moral obligation to ensure it succeeds.

Already, we’re seeing countries which had long been stuck in the cul-de-sac of commodity dependence move firmly onto a path of value addition and economic diversification.

Countries like Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire, which have already confirmed that they are drastically cutting their exports of unprocessed raw materials—and are making big strides at attracting the investments and putting in place the infrastructure to do it.

And as the AfCFTA gets further along, it’s drawing the interest, attention, and excitement of other trading partners across the Global South.

Trading partners like those in Brazil, Colombia, and the Caribbean, whose businesses and leaders are now working closely with their African counterparts to build deeper economic ties across the Atlantic—and together help right the injustices that trade itself once wrought.

Just as Marcus Garvey and the Black Star Line had once tried to do.

In other words, trade is a story of humanity both at its best, and at its worst.

It is, once again, a story about the choices we make, and the legacies we each leave behind.

It can be the single greatest rejoinder against the notion that trade is purely a transactional manoeuvre, a way of securing strategic assets, a naked display of power, or a way of settling scores.

It can be something that uplifts millions, gives a voice to billions, and changes the political standing of an entire continent.

And I can safely say this as someone who grew up in the very epitome of commodity dependence – a little town called Mandeville, built on the mining of bauxite, the critical ore used in aluminium manufacturing.

My entire career has been focused on creating a new narrative, where commodity dependence is no longer the order of the day, and equitable trading relationships are a given, rather than an aspiration.

That’s the first way I’m going to fight. Focusing on the mechanisms that enable countries to become beneficiaries from the wealth of their own resources in partnership with investments that will bring radical economic and social transformation.

**Second, we have to fight for aid that changes lives one action at a time** and builds real and lasting capacity on the ground.

It’s what we call at ITC “transforming trade, changing lives”—our new tagline, one that reflects not just what we’ve learned over six decades about what makes aid work best, but also what we’ve seen about how aid can fail.

For too long, overseas aid as we knew it was based on the model of “helicopter technical assistance”—technocrats, often based in the Global North, flying into the Global South, delivering a project, then flying back out again.

As you can guess, that didn’t really work.

Projects didn’t answer local needs.

They didn’t understand local circumstances.

They weren’t owned or led by the people who they were meant to serve—and who would yet be expected to keep these initiatives going after international agencies left.

But here is what we learned.

Overseas aid is at its best when it’s focused at the broad base of the pyramid.

When it’s directed at the people whose economic transformation will lift up an entire society: women, small businesses, and young people.

When the projects are crafted with and alongside the people who will have to live by the outcomes.

People like the ones I meet daily in my work at the International Trade Centre.

Every day, they remind me that you don’t have to be a world leader or an agency chief or a politician to make change happen.

And they remind me that trade and overseas aid, when done right, are worth fighting for.

These people are small business leaders and entrepreneurs.

They are, virtually across the board, based in developing economies.

And they are showing, by word and deed, what it means to “be that one.”

To stand in the face of history and choose a more connected, sustainable, and inclusive future—even, and perhaps especially, at a time when that is the harder path.

They have every reason to back down. Instead, they are stepping up.

These are the people we need to keep at the forefront of our minds, and of our decisions, in this chaotic world we live in, as we fight for trade that reduces poverty, empowers the vulnerable and marginalized, and gives the youth hope for the future.

**Third, we have to fight for the institutions that make trade and development aid transformative**. We have to fight to make those institutions open to all voices, not just those in power.

And we have to fight for the principles and ideals that make those institutions relevant and make them work.

I was born not long after Jamaica became independent in 1962.

Weeks after our independence, our flag was raised in New York at the United Nations headquarters to mark our entry into that body as an independent nation.

And from our earliest years as part of the United Nations, we made it our mission to fight for those who still did not have a voice.

We proposed the International Year for Human Rights, along with the hosting of an international conference on the progress the international community was making in upholding the human rights principles articulated in international law. We were also the first country that implemented a trade embargo against apartheid South Africa. We were small but we stood on principle, without apology.

At the core of our stance as a nation was, and continues to be, the words immortalized by the late Bob Marley, from Emperor Haile Selassies’ speech to the UN in 1963:

“Until the philosophy that holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, there will be war.”

In 1963, we became a contracting party to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the precursor to what is now known as the World Trade Organization.

Our Ministry of Trade and Industry gave this rationale: “any small country seeking a higher standard of living must depend on a steady expansion of its foreign trade.”

And, moreover, they said that “at a time when there is [a] general tendency towards closer international coordination and cooperation, it is vitally important that Jamaica should take its place in an international economic organization where it can present its own point of view.”

In other words, it was a decision born out of our economic hopes, and out of our staunch belief that international institutions needed voices like ours in the room.

I’m telling you this not just to celebrate what my country did.

I’m telling you this because that is what a responsible use of power is.

Attaining power isn’t an end goal in itself.

And having a voice in the halls of power isn’t just a privilege, but an obligation to serve those that are not yet able to be in the room.

Those who would otherwise be marginalized, or exploited, or forgotten.

It was 80 years ago when the United Nations was founded by 51 countries, from both the Global North and the Global South.

They came together in San Francisco and pledged that they would “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” while confirming that they had “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.”

And two years later, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, better known as the GATT, was signed by 30 nations in Geneva, pledging together that, “their relations in the field of trade and economic endeavour should be conducted with a view to raising standards of living,” among other goals for what a postwar economy and society could become.

What a vote of confidence those decisions were, at a time when there was little to be confident in.

It was a time when two world wars had just taken place in the span of just a few decades—the latter of which introduced nuclear warfare into the fabric of modern life.

It was a time when financial hardship and poverty were widespread, and where too often trade was known as a tool of economic warfare rather than as a force for peace, growth, and prosperity.

Now, the years that followed were hard. There were missteps and missed opportunities. There were moments of chaos and upheaval and disappointment. But despite those challenges, there was a common space where all countries for the first time had a voice, a sounding board, an interlocutor, a champion for the world’s highest aspirations and dreams of a better future.

The UN is not a perfect organization, but it is a great one. One that has impacted the millions of lives for the better.

That is why I chose my career—because I believe in the vision and the mission and I wanted to try to make a contribution, no matter how small, to this new global agenda. I joined my country’s foreign service and I became a lawyer.

One of my first postings was to Geneva as a delegate representing my country at the GATT during the final years of the Uruguay Round negotiations.

The Uruguay Round negotiations were a priority, because we saw in that moment the opportunity to influence the emergence of new trade rules in emerging areas such as services and intellectual property (IP), which would completely shift the axis of globalized trading system.

We kept fighting for an economic reset, for a level playing field, and for relationships between the Global North and Global South that would not perpetuate the old norms of trade.

And we had learned, from our first decades in the UN and the GATT, that small countries have the power to bring out the best in the international community, and to remind our partners that the big-picture ideals that inspired the multilateralism we all hold dear matters far more than short-term material gains or political power plays.

I will be the first to tell you that the results of the Uruguay Round negotiations weren’t without flaws.

But what they have made possible, through the now 30-year-old WTO, is a space where countries both big and small can craft a shared vision for trade that serves sustainable development. And that’s exactly what they are continuing to do.

Developed and developing, North and South, large and small. High, middle and low income, understanding the bigger picture, protecting the future and harnessing benefits for all.

That’s why I firmly believe that now is not the time for any of us to retreat from our quest to make the global economy fairer, more sustainable, and more equitable.

Nor can we let short-term needs dictate our actions, or default to transactional approaches to international cooperation, or disengage from participation in public life.

We must instead use the present moment to understand what’s really at the heart of these problems—beyond the rhetoric, beyond the headlines, beyond the brinksmanship—and strive to make things better.

We MUST remember what brought us to these agreements and the willingness to commit to protect this common vision

And it’s not just about what’s written in these agreements—what we often call the letter of the law.

It’s about speaking up for the spirit of the law—about remembering those first principles that inspired these agreements and using them as stepping stones to a more just world.

That’s what’s at stake.

There can be no strategic re-globalization, no economic reset, and no renegotiation of the terms of trade between developed and developing economies without an agreement on the foundational principles on which the law rests.

Those principles are trust, integrity, mutual respect, and the protection of fundamental human rights and dignity.

As I said at the outset, I cannot predict what will come next.

But what I can say is that now is the time to do more, not less.

To not delegate our fates, and the fates of those around us, solely to the powers that be, and to hide behind the letter of the law, rather than fight for the spirit of the law.

That means we cannot, ever, risk assuming that our voices alone are not enough to make real change happen.

That is why I want to conclude, in the spirit of the Tacitus Lecture, with a final history lesson of my own, of someone whose life has imparted a legacy that continues to reverberate across generations.

Of someone who also hailed from Jamaica, and whose name—Coke—I am proud to have inherited.

His full name was Burnett Birthright Coke.

He was a teacher and a farmer who entered the world of Jamaican politics in the mid-1940s, and throughout his life—both in and out of office—he fought passionately on behalf of his country and his home parish of South St Elizabeth, advocating for everything from access to potable water to better roads, schools, and hospitals.

By 1955, Burnett Birthright Coke, known affectionately as “B.B.,” had become Jamaica’s Speaker of the House. And that happened at a time which coincided with a major wave of migration from the Caribbean to Britain.

Young men and women, from the postwar years onward, had been invited and encouraged to come to Britain to help fill many of the jobs left empty after the Second World War and help the British economy get back on its feet.

Unfortunately, they didn’t always receive a warm welcome.

It was a time when many pubs, boarding houses, and shops liked to make clear who they would serve and who was undesirable, posting signs that read “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish,” or some variation of the same.

Many of the members of what became known as the Windrush Generation were greeted not just with hostility and mistrust in their new home, but far worse.

Because this was a generation that coincided with another generation—the one featuring the rise of a youth subculture known as the Teddy Boys—who became known just as much for their love of Edwardian fashions as for the horrific racial violence that they engaged in, often targeting those Caribbean nationals who had made their homes in Britain.

It was those attacks that brought B. B. Coke here nearly 70 years ago to meet with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and insist that more be done to end the violence, along with the racism that underpinned it.

And it was also about ending so much more than racialized violence.

It was about insisting, even demanding, that the relationship between our countries be fundamentally reset—that rather than repeating the ills of the colonial past, we could chart together a far stronger post-colonial future.

It was about a new version of trans-Atlantic migration that would stand in staunch opposition to the horrors of the Middle Passage, and instead show that a better story was still possible.

Those were not easy conversations. But for him, they were essential.

Because it didn’t matter that the people being attacked weren’t living in Jamaica or in the Caribbean anymore.

What mattered was that people were being attacked

…for the colour of their skin…

…for the accents of that coloured their speech…

…and for the very fact that they had come to make a contribution to the British economy, often leaving behind their friends, families, and communities to do so.

They were treated as the cause of the dispossession that so many young people in postwar Britain were experiencing—rather than being recognized as part of the solution.

Things didn’t change overnight…. Lasting change never does.

The Notting Hill riots in 1958, a year after B. B. Coke’s meeting with Prime Minister Macmillan, showed that.

Those riots saw the Teddy Boys undertake vicious attacks against the Black community, employing tactics that ranged from petrol bombs to beatings.

But, things did change over time—because men like him were willing to pursue the courage of their convictions, without fear or favour.

Three years after B. B. Coke’s visit, Prime Minister Macmillan travelled to several countries, then colonies, in Africa that were pushing for independence, just like Jamaica.

And what he said then signalled, too, that a reset in colonial-era relationships was finally happening, finally possible, and, frankly, far overdue.

It was, simply, this: “the wind of change is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.”

And what a wind of change that was.

Now, B. B. Coke spent his life believing in these winds of change—even when he saw so much of humanity at its worst.

He believed in the long arc of history, and the role we each have to play in shaping it.

He believed that we could achieve more together than we each could individually.

And it is one of the great honours of my life to be his granddaughter.

Throughout my life, sometimes at moments when I least expected it, I have crossed paths with people whose life B.B. Coke touched, not just as a legislator, but as a teacher.

People who experienced his dedication to public service, and his kindness to others.

People who recognized that making change happen isn’t about the job title you have, but the values you hold and the commitment with which you defend them.

He left a legacy that reverberates 57 years after his death, because he planted seeds in people, in institutions, in causes that continue to bear fruit decades after he transcended this mortal coil.

Which is why this isn’t just a story about my grandfather.

It is also a story about my son, who I am proud to say is here in the audience today.

Like any parent, I think daily of what kind of world my child is inheriting; what challenges and opportunities will define the course of his life; and what legacies I can leave him.

And what I want him to know is this. That better days will lie ahead, but getting there is a choice, not a guarantee.

And I want him to hear that no voice is too small.

That an injustice in one part of the world is an injustice for all of the world.

That the good that he brings to the world matters.

That whatever path he takes in life, and whatever corner he chooses to fight, he has the ability to make a lasting difference.

One that goes beyond performative virtue-signalling, and instead changes what’s possible not just for himself, but for others, including people he may never meet.

I cannot promise that life won’t be without hardship, nor that the world will ever become calmer, nor that he will see the impacts of his actions within his lifetime.

But I can promise that choosing to “be that one” and fighting on behalf of those who don’t yet have a voice in the halls of power will always—always—be worth it.