

# CARIBBEAN EXPORTERS COLLOQUIUM

*TIME for ACTION- Report of the West Indian Commission*

WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

Delivered by

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## **The West Indian Commission**

*We are determined to work towards the establishment in the shortest possible time of a single market and economy for the Caribbean Community.*

It will soon be 24 years since that assertion at Grand Anse in 1989. West Indian technicians took their leaders to the brink of its implementation with the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas. But there was no action – no political action, no political will to act. In all the years, over two decades, nothing decisive has happened to fulfil that dream of Grand Anse.

But The Grand Anse Summit of 1989 had done something more concrete than its 'Charter of Dreams'. It passed a Resolution *on Preparing the People of the West Indies for the Twenty-First Century*. By

it Caribbean leaders established an **“Independent West Indian Commission for Advancing the Goals of the Treaty of Chaguaramas”** (emphasis as in original) and appointed me its Chairman. Prime Minister Robinson had consulted me before the Summit Meeting on this possibility, and I had agreed that I would Chair the Commission if this was the collective wish of the regional Heads of Government. My third term as Commonwealth Secretary General was coming to an end and the Commission could have my full attention.

We were given two years in which to work; and those two years were among the most intensive of my regional life. The Commission itself was a comingling of some of the finest West Indians Every CARICOM country was 'represented' – but only in the sense of 'belonging'. Every member was independent, and acted independently. All the Heads of Government were consulted and only in one case did a Prime Minister vary my proposal: the candidate, he said was not 'native born'. I made up for that by inviting the Governor-General of Barbados to be our Patron – the splendid Dame Nita Barrow. At grand Anse, I knew that Alister McIntyre, would be with me as Vice-Chairman as would Roderick Rainford and Vaughan Lewis ex officio members.

But I could not know how handsomely we would t be supported by a team of Commissioners of truly superlative order, and I pay tribute to my

colleagues for their impressive blend of skills, their professionalism with a practical touch; their humanism with a West Indian bias; their intellectual rigour not constrained by ideology; and not least for their staying on a rugged course with steady good humour. In the end, Chairing the Commission was not a task; hut a great privilege to have shared such an exciting experience with so worthy a team.

But there was more to that privilege. For all of us. Our consultations with the people of the Region rank among the most stimulating and rewarding experiences of our lives. We tried in our Report to convey the flavour of these 'groundings' with fellow West Indians. I hope we succeeded, because the richness of those encounters still need to be shared with all West Indians. The fact that our compatriots came forward in such numbers, no less than their written submissions to us; the frankness, often passion, sometimes anger, that characterised their presentations; the good humour that was ever present, the element of 'picong' directed to the Commission; and, always, the underlying message that they cared about their West Indianness, about their 'Caribbeanness' (as some preferred) -cared enough to come forward to 'tell it to the Commission': all this was not just an unforgettable personal experience, but a soulful process of enduring value in our evolving regionalism.

Each Member of the Commission will have high points, recollection of these consultations with people and with Governments in CARICOM, in the wider Caribbean and with West Indians abroad. For me, a few recollections conjure up of their immemorial quality:

- a poignant moment in Georgetown's City Hall with a young woman of Guyana's Amerindian Community speaking plaintively, but scolding, of the needs and hopes of the first peoples of CARICOM;
- our evening in Barrouallie, a fishing village in St. Vincent, in a dimly lit school hall, and the people, pleased that we had come to talk with them, telling us of their concerns: about unemployment, about teenage pregnancies, about the falling off of fishing catches and production of their famed 'black oil' (of aphrodisiac quality) that was their speciality;
- our public meeting in the Titchfield High School on a bluff overlooking one of the lovely bays of Jamaica's east coast; a school established 200 years ago where all kinds of linkages confirmed for us our oneness. One Commissioner had been trained nearby at a Methodist Seminary and had married a teacher of the school. The

Principal had been at the University of the West Indies with at least three other Commissioners; there were eight Guyanese teachers on the staff; one of the ladies in the audience had married an Antiguan and yearned aloud for the return of the 'Federal ships' so that she might travel through the Region;

- our meeting with sixth formers in Port-of-Spain when young people spoke with us about their anxieties, including anxieties about the emergence of ethnicity as a factor in national life — and our dialogue with them on the value of a transcendent regionalism that subordinates ethnic origin to an overarching West Indian identity;
- the Saturday morning I spent with Rex Nettleford and Allan Kirton talking with Rastafarians and others in Temple Yard in Barbados, as we reached out to them to hear at first hand of their grievances and to witness their industry and determination to overcome;
- the throbbing West Indianness of our' meeting in Birmingham in the English midlands when the diaspora spoke with us of their sense of being forgotten and neglected and their worry that their homeland - they were in no doubt that they were all West Indians there from a West

Indian homeland - was falling behind in responding to contemporary needs;

- a late night in Cuba which the Commission shared with Fidel Castro: his view of the present economic problems that Cuba faced and his resolve that the Cuban people would overcome them; and the chance it gave us to explore with him our own ideas of a wider Caribbean ultimately embracing all the countries of the Caribbean Basin – ideas which he welcomed;

- the irony of a visit to tiny Carriacou when ‘an old timer’ asked us - not mockingly, but in serious vein - what was ‘in it’ for Carriacou “joining up with all those poor people in Jamaica and Guyana and even Trinidad”: recalling to our minds an earlier time at Montego Bay in 1947 when those same sentiments were aired but with the countries reversed, Carriacou then among the ‘pauperised’ - as it seemed from Jamaica, 45 years ago.

There were messages for us in all those encounters - as in all the consultations everywhere. Messages of ‘today for you, tomorrow for me’; of ignoring only at our grave cost that integration is about people and their everyday concerns which go beyond such matters as ‘trade

regimes' and 'rules of origin'; of being mindful of how much we have to grow beyond our English speaking communities into the wider multilingual Caribbean; and many, many more messages. Our Report came to be about those messages; and about needed responses to them. *Time for Action* was something of a regional manifesto for the nineties and beyond - as we had been asked to provide by the Grand Anse Declaration.

As the Commission faced the many problems that were at hand and the others that lay ahead of the Region, we reminded ourselves of the strengths and achievements of the West Indies.

What we must not do, felt the Commission, is to run out of steam. The Moyne Commission's report 50 years before - a British Royal Commission - had led to many changes. Now, the region faced a time of threat to those achievements; social concerns that we could be falling back; new economic problems like shortages of foreign exchange which had not been a part of past experience. And with all our gains for democracy over the years there were deep anxieties about the quality of governance now - indeed, disaffection with the entire political process. And on top of it all was the emerging menace of the drug problem.

The West Indies, the Commission believed, needed to recapture some of the strengths of earlier years and knew that they must come from new generations. As we came to the end of our work, we were conscious that there was unlikely to be another Commission of this kind for many a year, perhaps for many a decade. That awareness enlarged our responsibilities,; but we were encouraged as well that a process of change had already begun. When CARICOM leaders accepted our interim proposals to ease up on the ‘hassle’ of travel in the Region, to create a single line at airports for ‘residents and. CARICOM nationals’; when they accepted that graduates of the University of the West Indies and other skilled West Indians, as well as West Indian media personnel, should be the start of a process of freeing up the right of West Indians to live and work anywhere in the Region; when they agreed. To establish the Caribbean Investment Fund and to take steps towards a common currency — in addition to quickening progress towards their goal of a Single Market and Economy — something we felt had begun to happen in the Region.

So, we were convinced of our potential to do much better in the future. There was enough that was positive in our domestic, regional and external circumstances to make us feel hopeful. But there was much to be done, and time was not on our side. The global system was

becoming more competitive and many nations were making great efforts to be more efficient in economic organization, and in resource, product and services markets. We must not be left behind – and many of our recommendations offered the means go forward. But, the Commission was unequivocal: we must go forward in unity. Regionalism, integration, are at the heart of getting our act together. As we move to what we hoped would be the early adoption and implementation of our central recommendations, that process would acquire momentum and help to give faith to the people of the Region that the end years of the 20th Century and the advent of a new millennium could be a period of hope, not of hopelessness.

The Commission called the report *Time for Action* to dramatise how necessary it was to speed up the process of integration - of acting together in a systematic way. Hence our central recommendation for the early establishment of a permanent CARICOM Commission, a small but high level authority in CARICOM working at the interface between political decision and practical action, a Commission with confidence to initiate proposals, update consensus, mobilise action and secure implementation of CARICOM decisions in an expeditious and informed manner. A small group of some of our best people drawn preferably from public and political life, engaged upon that task of making regional things

happen and making things happen regionally - engaged in that task twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, unencumbered by the burdens of office at the national level and freed of the technocratic and administrative roles that are the valid and valued domain of the Secretariat. We said in *Time for Action* that we regard this as the single most important decision West Indian leaders can take. Indeed, we said that if they took only one decision, we believed it should be this. We said so because we were convinced that without the Commission, or some such executive authority, we would not make progress regionally — and in our view that meant not stagnation but unravelling, not ticking over but falling apart.

Grand Anse was 1989, *Time for Action* was 1992. Fast forward to 2012 –twenty years later: Prime Minister Skerrit of Dominica recalls Derek Walcott’s acceptance speech as he received the Nobel Prize for Literature and likened the Caribbean to a beautiful vase that has been shattered by its history into many pieces, and continues (the PM) –

*To be quite frank, for the most part, the Community exists in the words of the Treaty only*

Prime Minister Gonsalves of St Vincent and the Grenadines affirms that

–

*CARICOM's mode of marking time at an historical moment of overwhelmingly awesome challenges for our region, which compellingly demands a more profound integration, is mistaken .... 'pausing' is but a euphemism for standing still which, in a dynamic world, is sliding backward.*

Former Prime Minister Owen Arthur claims –

*In a word the region faces the specter of becoming a 'failed society'....It is a challenge that makes it imperative that we strengthen every facet of our integration movement and move to a more perfect union.*

Prime Minister Kenny Anthony warns –

*The Caribbean is and has been for too long stalled at the cross-roads of indecision; stalled for so long that we are in danger of becoming anachrostatic...Quo vadis? Where are we going?...How do we get there? Clearly we cannot stand still. ...Time, I say, is verily upon us!*

And as the year closed, P.J. Patterson's respected voice from the past, my past, counsels his successors –

*Let me make it clear. Urgent steps are required to rescue CARICOM or else life of course may come too late to prevent permanent coma.*

Why is all this important to “Export Market Development”. Because Export Market Development of which we speak is in the regional context. It is maximizing regionalism, maximizing integration to further export market development. We addressed it in *Time for Action*. The very first of the ‘Economic Issues’ (pp 143-160):’ EXPORT-LED GROWTH’. And our premise was movement towards a Single Market within which there would be currency convertibility and capital and labour mobility. Twenty years later there are none of these pre-conditions. Last week in Georgetown, CARICOM officials reiterated their failure to agree a regime of ‘contingent rights’ – the sine qua non of even the very limited category of skills on which Heads had long agreed there should be labour mobility. The point is we are trying to secure export-led growth in the absence of the integration environment on which it was premised by *Time for Action*. West Indians understand – *WE ARE SPINNING TOP IN MUD!* They do not wonder why we are getting nowhere.

Let me end with a quotation from a tired West Indian. It is a quote from a local food vendor here in Barbados:

*From Jamaica to Guyana is one West Indian nation. What is the reason for a CARICOM passport if we can't have a Caribbean nation... I can't tell you what a Bajan is, because what you find in a Barbadian, you find*

*in a Trinidadian, in a Vincentian, in a Jamaican. Because people are just people, and West Indian people, we are a gem. I don't see Grenadians, Guyanese, St. Lucians: I see people. The only thing that separates us is us.*

So, whence the impediments to Export-led Development? Economic or political? Technical or environmental? Regional or national?

Can we solve the problems that impede export-led growth without resolving the problems that afflict regional integration?