

**PAPER DELIVERED BY HON. SIR LOUIS STRAKER, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, COMMERCE AND TRADE OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES AT A PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY HELD IN TOKYO, JAPAN WITHIN THE MARGINS OF THE CARICOM/JAPAN SECOND MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE, 01<sup>ST</sup> TO 03<sup>RD</sup> SEPTEMBER 2010.**

**CARIBBEAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY AND ITS DIVERSITY**

Before the arrivals of European explorers in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Caribbean as we know it today existed as an archipelago of individual independent islands and mainland territories, inhabited by various indigenous groups such as the Callinagos, the Ciboneys and the Arawaks. These indigenous communities it is believed, originated in South America and migrated northwards, establishing their own customs, traditions, religious practices and rudimentary systems of government and inhabiting these lands for hundreds of years without outside influence.

The archipelago stretches from the north coast of South America to as far north as the southern coast of the United States and, serves as a natural partition between the Caribbean Sea to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. The geography, climate, diversity and relative stability of the region provide the backdrop for the description of the Caribbean in travel publications, as an idyllic destination for holiday makers and the basis of the call for the Caribbean to be designated and recognized as a "zone of peace".

These independent countries were not identified as a homogenous region and a community as we know it today. They have historically been referred to as the West Indies, having its origins in the mistaken belief by Christopher Columbus (the first historically recorded European explorer to have traversed the region) that he had arrived in the East Indies. This explorer later learnt that he had stumbled on a completely different set of inhabited islands in the western hemisphere, which he promptly named the West Indies. The islands may have only been labeled "the Caribbean region" conveniently, for purposes of identification and control.

Professor Norman Girvan, one of the Caribbean's renowned economists and thinkers, in his paper presented at the John Sealy Memorial Lecture, in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago in 2001, provided a historical perspective of the Caribbean region. He quoted the Puerto Rican historian Antonio Gaztambide-Geigel who argued that the notion of a "Caribbean region" was invented by the United States at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a product of its own economic and military expansion into the area. This view, according to Professor Girvan was quite persuasive. The concept however, never really took hold until the 1960s.

Caribbean society and culture and the diversity which exists today, was shaped by over 500 years of conquest by European powers, slavery and indentureship, colonialism and neocolonialism and the period of self determination and political independence. The cultural diversity of the region is a product of the variety of ethnic groups: Indigenous people, Indians, Africans, Europeans, Chinese, within the Caribbean society and the particular ways of life manifested by each group.

This diversity was enriched by a significant influx of migrants of middle eastern descent, mainly merchants and traders, who were added to the mix in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have given the Caribbean its unique identity as a truly authentic civilization. Each ethnic group brought with them their traditional practices, beliefs, cuisine and customs. The Indians brought their traditional foods, such as curries and spices; the Africans brought their religious practices, such as shango and voodoo. These practices by the various ethnic groups have all been metamorphosed and enriched to create what is known today as the culture of the Caribbean, a unique style which is associated only with the Caribbean.

As Caribbean society evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it too has been subjected to its fair share of outside influences, some not very complementary to the ideals and aspirations of Caribbean people. These have found expression not simply in the conventional notion of cultural penetration which in itself, has been facilitated by the technological advances of the information age, but more profoundly, in the geo-political and ideological imperatives of our giant neighbour to the north. It is too often forgotten that externally imposed solutions to regional problems and peculiarities, is likely to engender new sets of challenges. This global village in which we live is replete with vivid examples of these imposed solutions and their resulting consequences.

The strength of Caribbean society and its determination to address its own problems have been summed up in a very enlightening address delivered by the late Errol Walton Barrow almost twenty four years ago, who as the then Prime Minister of Barbados, at a Conference in Miami in November 1986, had this to say:

*"It is dehumanizing to view the Caribbean as potential American problems. We are peoples with an identity and a culture and a history - the Parliament of Barbados will be 350 years old in 1989. We don't need lessons in democracy from anyone. However severe the economic difficulties facing the Caribbean, we are viable functioning societies with the intellectual and institutional resources to understand and grapple with our problems .Collectively, we have a heritage of exquisite natural beauty entrusted to us. The Caribbean is, after all, a civilization."*

Our own Dr. Ralph E. Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been in the forefront as a leading regionalist, proclaiming that this historical experience, the diversity of our culture, our common heritage and the mix of ethnicity, expressions and values, have made us unique and qualifies us to be counted among the world's civilizations, as an authentic Caribbean Civilization. We may not be able to lay claim to as many centuries of existence as the Japanese civilization, but we can certainly proclaim the Caribbean to be a relatively young, authentic civilisation with a history and an identity of its own.

Dr. Gonsalves using the musical metaphors and language for which the Caribbean is well noted, beautifully summed it up when he said ***"We are the songs of the Callinagos, Arawaks and Amerindians, we are the rhythms of Africa, we are the chords of Asia, we are the melody of Europe and the homegrown lyrics of the Caribbean"***. This formulation captures the diversity and plural nature of Caribbean

society and gives an appreciation and recognition of the rich heritage from whence we came. Therein lies the essence of Caribbean culture, its people and its civilisation.

As I indicated earlier, this concept of a Caribbean region evolved from the loose grouping of English, Spanish, French and Dutch speaking West Indian islands, colonized by those European powers of the day. Some academics have widened the concept to that of a Greater Caribbean, encompassing not only the individual islands, but also the countries of Central and South America whose shores are washed by the Caribbean Sea. This expanded concept brings a whole new dimension to the notion of the Caribbean, but either concept holds true to a simple fact and that is, all of these nations share a common history of conquest, slavery and indentureship, colonialism and independence.

I referred earlier to the name "West Indies", the preferred terminology used during the period of plantation slavery and colonialism and even in this modern era, still used interchangeably with the name "Caribbean". To appreciate the evolution of this unique identity -despite Antonio Geigel's "persuasive" theory-, it is important to understand and appreciate the socio-economic and political imperatives which would have influenced these changes and the role of Caribbean political and civic leaders as well as academia, in charting the course towards this Caribbean identity.

Professor Girvan in his historical perspective on the Caribbean, traces the post slavery and indentureship period of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and opined that it was during this period of colonialism that the political and social expression of a West Indian

nationhood was nurtured and developed, shaped by the writings and speeches of great West Indian authors and thinkers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In reference to the role played by these thinkers, he goes on to state and I quote:

*“ These seminal works pioneered a view of the Caribbean that transcended language and colonial ties and focused on shared historical experience: decimation of the indigenous people, metropolitan rivalry and war, the plantation system, slavery and indentureship. In the post war decades, these insights were fleshed out by successive generations of scholars. Professional historians analysed slave societies, creolisation, popular resistance and political struggle. ....Sociologists and cultural anthropologists analysed ethnicity and cultural diversity, race and class and pluralism. Political economists analysed the plantation system, dependency and multinational corporations. Caribbean history, Caribbean society, Caribbean economy- they all became sub-disciplines”.*

It is instructive to note how in his analysis, he identifies in a succinct way the root components of Caribbean society, its heritage its culture and its diversity. He gives us an insight into the path travelled by our forebears and the level of awareness acquired and manifested over a period of time, in their quest to fashion a Caribbean identity. What is of signal importance here, is the recognition that Caribbean society was borne out of adversity and struggle. These have helped to mold and shape a society whose strength lies in its ethnic and cultural mix. When we view and listen to the daily occurrences on the international news media and compare ourselves with some other

parts of the world, we count ourselves fortunate to be in a region whose people for generations, has lived in relatively peaceful ethnic and cultural coexistence. This is a status quo which we have to carefully cherish and nurture and jealously safeguard and defend.

In continuing the analysis of Professor Girvan, he went on to state that:

*...the new awareness seeped into the popular consciousness. By the 1960s, in the aftermath of constitutional independence, Anglophones had started to call themselves and their institutions "Caribbean" rather than "West Indian". Note how the West Indies Federation gave way to the Caribbean Community – CARICOM. Today, we have a host of other "Caribbean organizations", the CXC, CAREC, CARIRI, the CTO and many others. No matter that the membership of most of these institutions is exclusively or mainly Anglophone. What is significant is the subtle shift in proclaimed identity".*

To speak of the Caribbean culture, its society and its diversity, is to speak of struggle, sacrifice and resilience. The post independence era has brought its own set of challenges and these have become even more acute, over the last two decades. The twin phenomena of liberalization and globalization, fuelled by the revolution in information and communication technology, have established new frontiers and new hurdles with which Caribbean society has had to contend.

Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, in his stirring address entitled *"Challenges of small Caribbean States in the globalised world, good governance and constitutional reform"*

delivered at the University of the West Indies Centre for Continuing Studies in Basseterre, St. Kitts on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2003, gave a detailed analysis of how Caribbean society, drawing on its cultural diversity and on its own resources, was able to confront past challenges and in this address, provided a veritable "road map" for moving Caribbean society forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

He opined that as a society, the strategic and tactical approaches of the Caribbean towards globalization and the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be determined by whether we subscribe to the school of thought which espouses "inaction and surrender," or to the other school, which advances the cause of "resistance, creative responses and the ennobling of our Caribbean civilization."

Dr. Gonsalves further went on to state the following:

*"In countering the ravages occasioned by aspects of globalization from outside and the veritable domestic cancer bred by those who raise the flag of surrender from inside, we cannot simply say: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do". That too, would be the evangelism of surrender. The alternative path is one based on a culture of resistance and the creative building of our society, economy and civilization.*

*This culture of resistance and creative construction of our socioeconomic apparatuses must be grounded in more than what the economic and political theorists and practitioners normally offer. We must go to the collective wisdom of the folk; the creative imagination of our people and their artists, poets and*



*novelists; the tried and tested values which have come from the bowels of the people and the abundant social capital which resides in our people. Derek Walcott, George Lamming, Edward "Kamau" Brathwaite, Martin Carter, C.L.R James, Walter Rodney, Michael Manley, Errol Barrow, Robert Bradshaw, Arthur Lewis, George Beckford and a host of other brilliant intellectuals, creative writers and Caribbean nationalists have taught us these basic and enduring truths."*

As a son of our Caribbean civilization, I am indeed proud of this heritage. It is the legacy of these great Caribbean nationalists which the society must now hold aloft. The flag bearers are many and as a plural and culturally diversified society, the Caribbean has made its mark and continues to do so in the international community. Its music and artistes are world renowned. Reggae, Calypso and Soca find expression in the works of Bob Marley, Sean Paul, Rihanna, Kevin Little, Mighty Sparrow and others. Its domination of international cricket for decades up to the mid 90s with the names of Sir Garfield Sobers, Sir Vivian Richards, Brian Lara and others is well documented; Usain Bolt, Asafa Powell and others fly the flag high, in the competitive world of track and field. The list is a long one.

I close by affirming that Caribbean society is well grounded, it has stood the test of times. It has found strength and sustenance in its cultural diversity and the plural nature of its civilization. It is up to us and future generations to ensure that this legacy does not die.

Thank you.

