

Bridging Regional Cultures
Talk to Rotary District Conference in Barbados
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Let me start by thanking Rotarian District Governor, Tony Watkins for inviting me to speak this evening and my thanks too to Rotarian Mrs. Sonya McDonald – Alleyne who I believe also had a hand in getting me here. I have had an opportunity to speak to Rotarians in Jamaica in the past, but this chance to address a gathering drawn from so many parts of the Caribbean is one that could not be missed. One of the features of Rotarians which appeals to me is its broad reach across many nations of our globe and its ability to attract people of different age groups. That mix of young and the more mature can sometimes set off an intriguing dynamic. Indeed I am reminded of the story.

The theme for this conference “Building Healthy Communities, Bridging Regional Cultures” could not have come at a more timely moment. All our countries in the Caribbean are beset by common threats and one of them is non-communicable diseases. Combating these disorders is not only the purview of the health profession but depends very much on mobilizing our communities. Non communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and stroke are often the result of obesity, smoking, diets excessive in salt and lack of exercise. These are problems not solved in doctors’ offices but require engagement of our schools, churches, civic organizations talk show hosts, and other community groups to educate and advocate for policies and practices that

will combat the causes of chronic diseases. I complement the Rotarians for addressing the subject of diabetes, its prevention and management at this conference – I am certain that your work will prove to be a mighty blow in making a difference to the health of our communities.

My subject tonight is not about controlling disease but about “Bridging Regional Culture”. Building effective bridges within our region is a subject that has attracted much discussion of late particularly in CARICOM countries where there is great concern, shared by many of us, that our political leaders are drifting away from the ideals of Caribbean integration that they championed a few decades ago. These fears were enunciated recently in an outstanding speech given by Sir Shridath Ramphal in Grenada, entitled “Is the West Indies West Indian”. In moving and elegant terms, Sir Shridath expressed very justifiable concerns about the strength of our commitment to regional integration. Drawing on a quotation from that important speech and- I quote:

Quote

*“In 1989 in Grand Anse (Grenada), CARICOM leaders announced their intention to form a Caribbean Single Market and Economy in 5 years. Yet 22 years after that announcement, progress towards that goal remains elusive and the faith of many West Indian people in its achievement has in many ways been lost.” **He went on to make the statement** “except for Prime Minister Tilman Thomas, no Caribbean leader mentioned CARICOM in their New Year’s message..... For most West*

Indian Governments Caribbean Integration is (becoming) a thing apart, not a vital organ of national life”

Unquote

I believe that a greater connectedness of the Caribbean peoples is an imperative, an opportunity that if missed will torpedo our chances of achieving some distinct identity in the world in which we live. When you look at how the world is grouped today, the Caribbean, and I include Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and all the countries of the Southern Archipelago in that Caribbean, has no distinct identity. We are lumped with Latin America, the Americas, the Western hemisphere or whatever. Someone described our space as a black hole!! In most respects we are invisible as individual nations except when we are said to threaten the interests of our neighbors to the North, as in the case of Cuba, or when disaster strikes as recently exemplified in the case of Haiti. Our rich literature, music, dance, and yes, our achievements in medicine, the sciences and in other intellectual spheres are the recognized but not linked to our specific part of the world our individual achievements are like a headless corpse separated from the rich body of people that served as the stem and roots of the flowering of creative ability.

We need to draw closer together because as a collective we are several millions of people as opposed to pockets of a few hundred thousand in relatively tiny , separate island enclaves struggling to find ways to survive in a world that is

leaping forward at an ever more rapid rate. A world that does not think twice about carelessly trampling on those without a voice or presence – even the countries of sub Saharan Africa with their multitude of challenges are emerging more and more as a visible and viable force because they have the presence and numbers that a world dominated by commerce cannot ignore. We must find common ground, too, not only for reasons of economic survival, but because we are subject in very real ways to unique threats of nature that are increasing with global warming, threats to our environment and to our seas because of increasing numbers of people visiting our shores, and threats of crime and violence. When these are superimposed on sluggish economic growth, separateness can be tantamount to inviting the fate of the Titanic.

I believe that our greater union will not come about politically in the foreseeable future but will require collaboration rooted in our common culture. Upon other common cultural base, linkages need to be forged out of partnerships in business, collaboration in areas such as health, education, and joint research, and through civic action engendered by organizations such as the Rotarians.

That our people are integrally connected is a truth that requires no debate. Our music, art, literature, culinary, social and economic lives are in elemental ways founded on a history of slavery and indentureship, enforced in the name of sugar and mining by triumphant European powers of the 17th through the 20th centuries. Our very essence, our being arises out of a diverse mix of people emanating from that complex past who have learned to live in relative harmony

with each other. Perhaps one of the most diverse in our region is Suriname, where there are people of African, Amerindian, East Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, Lebanese and Jewish descent. It is said that there are more than 20 languages spoken there – Dutch, Hindi, Hakka, Cantonese, English, Spanish, Maroon and many more. Many religions are practiced and in the words reportedly said by one commentator “People of Suriname live in such harmony that a Muslim mosque can be built within a stone’s throw distance of a Jewish Synagogue but the stone will never be thrown”.

Other West Indian island nations may not be as diverse, but they are certainly a kaleidoscope of peoples and cultures living side by side in the pursuit of their daily lives.

Our music, our festivals, our art, all draw on this rich brew of our collective past. The Banya and Kaseko music of Suriname, the Gwo-ka and la beguine of Guadeloupe, the steel pan of Trinidad and Tobago all originate in rich African drumming traditions. Our colourful festivals, most extravagantly produced in Trinidad’s carnival, and also evidenced in Martinique and Guadeloupe, and in the Barbados’ crop-over and the Bahamas’ Junkanoo, all evince a primeval excitement stimulated by that indescribably beautiful blend of colour, dance and songs drawing on a common psyche of a shared past. In the last half century, music of calypsonian – Sparrow, Kitchener, Chalky is becoming enriched by that drawn from India with singers such as Ramdeo Chaitoe and Dropati of Suriname, Chutney music of Trinidad with singers such as Sundar Popo, Anand Yonkaran and

Ramrajee Praboo. Our relatedness is evidenced too in our foods combining in sometimes intriguing ways the cuisines of Europe, Africa, India, China and native Amerindian peoples. Which of us does not know and enjoy a good stewed chicken, peas and rice (rice and peas in Jamaica!), fried plantain, curried mutton, chow-mein, pepper pot dasheen, cassava or breadfruit?

We are in many respects a new, evolving people. Our indigenous literature, our music and art forms, our universities, our emergence as independent nations are primarily manifestations of the twentieth century. Up to the 1920s, a mere 80 years ago, our people were largely submerged, invisible entities unmentioned in the stories and histories recounted by our European colonizers. It was only in the 1920s with the emergence of thinkers, writers and political leaders such as Anton de Kom of Suriname, Aime Cesaire of Martinique and CLR James of Trinidad that there began a truly credible attempt to affirm our African-Caribbean identity and to challenge the inferior status to which people of colour were confined. The intellectual flowering of these indigenous literary giants served as the fountainhead for the trade union movement of the 1930s led by T.A. Marrayshow of Grenada, Grantley Adams of Barbados, Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante of Jamaica, Captain Cipriani of Trinidad, Critchlow of Guyana and others. Each operated in their own country but they were fully cognizant of what was taking place elsewhere in neighbouring countries and ready to make common cause against the colonial powers in their struggle for self-rule. It was the Trade Union movement that led to the independence movements of the post war years

and to the ill-fated West Indian Federation. Then came independence for many of our tiny nations enabling the new political directorate who discovered quickly that the best means of achieving some form of visibility of influence comes from acting together. It is with this understanding that led to a CARIFTA then CARICOM

Perhaps the maturing process of our region is best exemplified not in our politics but in the growth of our creative genius, manifest in literature, music, dance and academic scholarship. Derek Walcott of St. Lucia and V. S. Naipaul of Trinidad, both Nobel prize winners, George Lamming of Barbados, Wilson Harris of Guyana, Maryse Condé and Myriam Warner of Guadeloupe, and many , many more leave no doubt that as a people we can have a meaningful global presence in literature. Our fashion and art manifest in many ways, one of them being the exquisite carnival costumes of a Peter Minshal, Brian MacFarlane and others, Rex Nettleford's National Dance Theater Company of Jamaica all speak to this same creativity. Over the past 50 years, our music has gained international recognition - even in the far reaches of Europe and Asia, reggae, Soca, and Zouk music are recognized and appreciated. Global acknowledgement of our scholars in areas such as history, economics, medicine, the social sciences, humanities and arts are all praise worthy features of our emerging people on a global stage.

While these achievements may be rooted in some common history and psychic space, we are still in many ways separate in reality. There are still too few West Indians who have visited other islands of even the English speaking Caribbean, and the numbers become sparse indeed if one were to include visits to the Dutch,

French and Spanish speaking Caribbean. While we live within swimming distance of each other, we are separated by language and retain attachments to countries of our former colonizers or to North America that are closer than attachments to each other.

How do we bridge our regional differences more effectively? How do we escape the narrow confines of our tiny island nations, in which some sectors of our societies for personal or political gain may choose to restrict us. Here are a few closing thoughts.

I believe our integration as a Caribbean people, and that includes all our countries, English speaking, Dutch, French and Spanish will be accomplished not by politicians but by organizations such as the Rotarians and like groups prepared to make conscious efforts to bridge the divide of language and neo-colonial relationships. It is noteworthy that the divide is being breeched even as we speak by our businesses such as banks, insurance companies, manufacturers, retailers food franchises and the like. Our professional communities- medical, legal, clerical, engineering have long histories of fraternal contact and communication with the broader Caribbean and these are expanding. The academic community and, in this context, the University of the West Indies has and can provide a common space to share knowledge gathering, intellectual discourse, creativity and innovation across our region. Presently, the University of the West Indies holds the position of the Presidency of UNICA, an organization that comprises

universities in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Columbia, Haiti, Guyana and others in the Dutch and French Caribbean. This organization provides avenues for student and staff exchanges and the sharing of scholarship. I remind this audience that universities serve a purpose greater than training students for degrees. Mature full service universities are also places that generate new knowledge and that draw people from around the region and globe to share that knowledge and generate even newer ideas. There was a time when only academics were involved in these exercises but those times have assuredly changed and increasingly we are reaching out to outside of our walls to forge common discourse about subjects vital to our lives. Our discussions must involve leaders from government, business and civil society. We are looking more and more to making our university a more aggressive instrument of regional integration and growth, drawing stakeholders from the broader society into our space and our going out into their space to enable more meaningful collective action. I also believe that we in the English speaking Caribbean must do like our French, Spanish and Dutch neighbors and insist that our students learn the languages of the Caribbean – Spanish, French, Dutch, and Papiamentu. Comfort with the languages of our neighbours is a good basis for people to visit and fraternize with other islands – of course cheaper air travel will help.

Finally, I believe that if we are to better bridge our regional cultures, we have to learn to respect each other. It is so painful hearing West Indians from one country disparaging and otherwise disrespecting those from another. We already share the pain of slavery and indentureship, and in one way or another all our

people have triumphed and prevailed against these considerable odds. Each of us from wherever we are, needs to treat our Caribbean counterparts with the dignity and respect they deserve. It is not just the right thing to do, it is an imperative if we are to survive as a group in the current global maelstroms.

As I have emphasized more than once in this talk, bridging the Cultures of the Region will not occur by accident or for that matter by political dictate, but will rely on initiatives undertaken by all of us, business, professional groups, civic organizations, educational institutions learning more about each other, visiting each other and learning to respect each other as we respect ourselves.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have been a good audience and the time has come to end.

Thank you for a wonderful evening. I hope that you will continue to have many more occasions like this that will draw people together from across our regional divide to make a collective difference to the world in which we live.