

***COMMONWEALTH YOUTH DAY LECTURE***  
**"A PARAGIGM SHIFT IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT POLICY"**

**30<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2006**

**SALUTATIONS**

- Mr. Chairman
- Hon. Anthony Wood, Minister of Education, Youth Affairs and Sports
- Mr. Lionel Weekes, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of EYAS
- Mr. Henry Charles, Regional Director of the Commonwealth Youth Programme
- Mr. Richard Carter, Director of Youth Affairs
- Distinguished Guests
- All those listening on radio or watching on television
- Representatives of the media
- Ladies and gentlemen
- Young people of the Caribbean

I want to start by congratulating the Commonwealth Youth Programme and the current Regional Director for reviving the tradition of rolling out at least one innovative project per year for the development of Caribbean youth. I also wish to commend the Government of Barbados, through the Ministry of EYAS, and in particular, the Division of Youth Affairs, for always being at the front of the queue to run with any new ideas that promise to enhance its

capacity to empower our young people. I am delighted to be the first contributor to this series of lectures, which are intended to bring about a paradigm shift in the Youth Policy environment. I thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on a subject that has been my mission and my passion all my life, while working and living in several different Commonwealth countries. I also want to remind you that even though many of the references are to situations in Barbados to which the audience can relate, they also apply to all the other countries of the region, simply because we are one people.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most remarkable observations in ex-colonial, Commonwealth countries, and dare I say most countries of the world, is the willingness of service providers whose responsibility is to serve the people and to help them break free from the shackles that retard progress, to choose to take on roles that invariably enable them to shirk that responsibility. Built into every role in such countries are written and unwritten rules of behaviour, brought forward from a previous less egalitarian era that define the relationship between the dispenser and receiver of the service. It is essentially a political relationship with the balance of power tilted in favour of the dispenser.

This often manifests itself in strained relationships between:

- rich and poor
- employer and employee
- shopkeeper and customer
- white and black
- man and woman
- old and young
- teacher and pupil
- parent and child

Throughout childhood, during what is called the process of socialization, the nature of these relationships is learned and reinforced until it becomes the norm. Children learn what behaviour is expected of them and in most cases comply with the wishes of those who have authority over them.

By the time a child reaches adulthood in the Caribbean context, s/he fully understands who, in each of these role relationships, has the power to constrain the behaviour of the other, and to persuade him/her to act in particular ways even when it is against their own interest.

Even though some children may question the relationship between these linked roles during adolescence, so powerful are these norms and the sanctions at the disposal of the society, that most of them decide to give up the struggle and to comply by the time they reach

the age of 25. These are the terms on which the vast majority of young people are fully integrated into the society as adult members.

## **THESIS**

But does it have to be like this? From a sociological perspective there is nothing sacred or immutable about the status quo. Indeed it is easy to conceive of a situation in which the roles are reversed. The truth is that the employer, the shopkeeper, the teacher, and even the parent could find themselves in a more egalitarian and even subordinate role relationship if the other party could (peacefully) amass sufficient resources to shift the balance of power in their favour. *How feasible is this in our time in our region?*

The period we are now living through is one of those rare occasions in history when we have to acknowledge that the tide is turning in favour of youth. As you know we are currently experiencing a technological revolution that is forcing us to make a fundamental break with the past. It was Nicholai Kondratiev (of Soviet Russia) who reminded us that new civilizations emerge as a result of technological revolutions that offer solutions to serious challenges that threaten the survival of existing societies. For example the discovery of the stirrup enabled horsemen to ride out of their geographical confines, to stay in the saddle for much longer and plunder neighbouring tribes. It enabled the likes of Genghis Khan to conquer and unite previously weak and isolated tribes into one of the

largest and most powerful empires the world has known. Similarly the harnessing of steam by Matthew Bolton, James Watt and William Murdock enabled the British middle class to convert displaced peasants into industrial workers and propel a collection of small islands off the coast of Europe into carving out the British Empire, on which the sun never set. Over shorter periods, industrial innovations revive sagging capitalist economies and prevent the collapse of Western economies as Karl Marx predicted. For this insight, Kondratiev spent 8 years in a Communist prison in the 1930's.

Today the microchip is transforming our world. The new technology is rapidly changing every area of our lives from manufacturing to the provision of services, from transport to entertainment, from communication to mass destruction in war. Above all, it has increased our access to information. And if information is power, then those who have access to information are in a prime position to amass power.

It so happens, that at this point in time, young people seem to have a mastery of the technology that far surpasses that of their elders. I am not sure if it is the methodology of intuitive learning associated with the new technology or the natural fascination of the young with novelties or the playfulness of the new gadgets. But the fact is that young people have an absolute advantage over their elders in using modern equipment. Whether it is computers, or ipods, or DVD's or

robots young people are at the cutting edge of the use and development of these machines, which now dominate our lives. This is the new frontier for those who are privileged to experiment with the new technology. It is significant to note that Bill Gates only succeeded when he broke out of the constraints of the traditional educational methodology by dropping out of college and doing what he enjoyed in his garage.

It is that spirit of adventure, that sense of freedom, that method of learning through doing, that we want to engender in our young people. It is that feeling of going where mankind has never gone before that we want to foster among our youth. It is that belief that they can break free of the shackles of convention that we want to develop among our youth. It is that problem-solving approach to challenges, an approach that has been systematically suppressed in our education system, that we want to cultivate among our youth.

I believe that there are a number of challenges that are ticking away like time-bombs in our Caribbean communities, which if not addressed as a matter of urgency have the capacity to wipe us off the face of the earth. I fear that the standard response is that if we do nothing, someone somewhere will find a solution and come riding in like a white knight in shining armour, on a white horse, to rescue us from disaster. The problem is that in many cases these challenges are unique to us in the Caribbean and it is not in the interests of

those who have historically seduced us into believing that they are our messiahs to come to our rescue. This time we are on our own; and much more than “subdued hysteria” and begging for help will save us.

Recent research across the region, including some in which I have been personally involved in Guyana and Dominica for example, indicate that these issues include the following:

- i. Low self-esteem deriving from the lack of an authentic ethnic identity
- ii. The suppression of a culture, defined as a way of life, that works for those who subscribe to it
- iii. The erosion of the spiritual bedrock of our society
- iv. Strained and conflict-ridden gender relations
- v. Inability to cope with natural disasters
- vi. Persistent poverty
- vii. The unrelenting spread of HIV/AIDS
- viii. Failure to appreciate the psychological, social, economic, and health benefits of sports
- ix. The routine abuse of substances like alcohol and marijuana
- x. Failure to prepare for inevitable Caribbean integration

The standard approach to these challenges is fraught with danger. Doing nothing is no longer an option. Let us consider them in a bit more detail.

**(1) Low self-esteem:** The importance of self-esteem in overcoming problems cannot be over emphasized. High-self esteem derives from a positive identity that finds reflection and reinforcement in one's ethnicity. The only ethnicity that the majority of us can categorically claim to be ours is an African identity.

That being the case, how much are we as a people, who are unmistakably of African origin willing to identify with Africa? And how much do we know of the positive contributions that Africa and Africans have made to world civilization over thousands of years? Why has our education system traditionally focused and why does it continue to focus on the achievements of Europeans and Europe?

## **(2) Culture**

I distinctly remember Professor John Rex, one of the foremost Race Relations experts in Britain giving a keynote lecture in Birmingham in 1988 on the contributions to British Society by the various ethnic groups who settled in that great city after World War II. When it came to West Indians, all he could single out as distinctly Caribbean was the annual Carnival. Everything else, from religion to cricket was a variation on British culture. All the other groups were defining their

uniqueness in cultural terms and using their culture as a way of life that defended them from racism and more important, that was helping them to create wealth and employment for their people. The link between culture, ethnicity and identity should now be clear.

Is “wuk-up” the only culture we can claim to be our own? How can our real culture that we know exists underground in a disjointed form, begin to work for us in the Caribbean? Have we got enough confidence to assert it and demonstrate that we are different, but equal?

### **(3) Spiritual Well-Being**

There is currently considerable concern about the increase in violence and anti-social behaviour among young people. The National Commission on Law and Order in Barbados concluded that the erosion of moral values, underpinned by spiritual beliefs, were the causes of the escalation of such behaviour.

Even though conflict, manifesting itself in anti-social behaviour can draw attention to social injustice, the point needs to be made that no society can survive for any length of time without value consensus deriving from common spiritual beliefs.

Can we afford to let our children grow up without spiritual moorings for their social values?

#### **(4) Gender Relations**

Gender relations in the Caribbean are currently at an all time low. It is not because the conditions under which women live out their lives are worse. On the contrary it is because those conditions are improving. Women in the Caribbean won their stripes during slavery, and continue to prove their worth by producing and reproducing the most valuable resources our countries have to offer. Their contributions to the economy and their ability to both mother and father their children are legendary. Their educational achievement, measured in terms of their outnumbering men 2:1 in our major tertiary level institutions place them in a position to make an even larger contribution to what Hon. Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines calls ***the emerging Caribbean civilization***. And it is this very achievement, which has caused a violent male backlash, now being monitored by my colleague Diane Cummins and various women's organizations across the region.

It would appear that in the heads of men is a residual male chauvinistic culture, enshrined in the norms of the society that define women as subordinate, a conviction that is constantly colliding with a reality that demonstrates that in many cases *a woman is the best man for the job*.

What are the long-term implications of this conflict between male and female partners? And above all how can we resolve it?

### **(5) Natural Disasters**

The small island states of the Caribbean are notoriously prone to natural disasters. Every year we are surprised by hurricanes, with insufficient resources to mitigate the impact of such disasters and recover quickly from them. Compare the response of Cuba to impending hurricanes. There is always a massive evacuation before and a massive reconstruction campaign after the event.

Not even in the richest country of the region, Trinidad and Tobago, are we prepared for disasters. The recent earthquake was a sad reminder. It is patently obvious that we must do better if we want to survive.

### **(6) Persistent Poverty**

One of the advantages of growing old, is the opportunity to witness how *persistent* poverty can be for particular individuals and groups. Over and above a profound theoretical understanding of why certain strata in society remain poor, I see it with my own eyes. I remember people being poor in the 1950's and find them again nearly 50 years later still caught up in a cycle of poverty. Our villages contain considerable evidence of people who have been by-passed by national progress. Despite the fact that they are intelligent people,

despite the fact that they have been law-abiding citizens, despite the fact that they have worked hard all their lives, they are still trapped in a culture of poverty.

In many countries of the region every year thousands of young people come on to the job market with high expectations only to face a situation in which youth unemployment rates hover around 50%.

It is therefore not too difficult to predict what will happen to the unemployed youth, the boys on the block and even the army of “working poor” who eke out a living on the margin of our society.

Surely we can do better.

## **(7) HIV/AIDS**

I do not have to tell you that the rate of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean is the second highest in the world. I do not have to tell you that because HIV/AIDS is a disease that is primarily transmitted in normal sexual intercourse, every time you practice unsafe sex you run the risk of contracting the disease. And in a society where having a child is a rite of passage to adulthood, in which young people routinely count having a child as one of their major achievements, a society in which there is still a stigma attached to childlessness, the pressure to have sex is considerable. Add to this the pressure from music and the peer group, which Richard Carter has been studying for many

years. It should therefore not surprise you to hear that the rate of contracting HIV is now highest among youth, and that young women are contracting it at an alarming rate. Mother-to-child transmission in those jurisdictions where widespread testing and anti-retroviral treatment are not available poses another threat to our survival.

What advice can we give to young people who court death in the act of creating life?

### **(8) Sports**

No one who has read the works of C.L.R. James could fail to conclude that we have not even begun to understand the importance of sport in our lives. Once again Cuba has shown how sports could be a means of national development, with considerable spin-offs in terms of self-esteem, income, national pride, good health and social well-being.

In a region that is renowned for its sporting prowess, we find that only a small minority of young people are involved in sports. Talented young people are involved only as spectators, while obesity and related illnesses are on the increase. Professor Henry Frazer is constantly reminding of the financial and social costs of "couch potato" lifestyles. Research throughout the region is showing that a decreasing number of youth are getting involved in sports.

In 2007 the eyes of the world will be on the Caribbean as thousands of visitors descend on the region for ICC Cricket World Cup. How prepared are we to capitalize on this opportunity and to derive maximum benefit in all the areas of life that sports affect? How ready are our young people to cash in on this sporting extravaganza? And as an aside, what chance does the West Indies cricket team have of winning the cup at home?

I believe that hosting the World Cup is a major achievement for the region and it is not too late to fire the imagination of young people and mobilize them to get involved and derive some benefit from it.

### **(9) Substance Abuse**

The traditional abuse of alcohol with all the social pathologies associated with it is now compounded by the abuse of marijuana. Whereas the alcoholic breadwinner worked all week and got stoned over the weekend, the modern drug addict is unable to hold down a job. In order to survive s/he has to resort to illegal and immoral means of earning a dollar, in our increasingly rigid cash economies.

What are the long-term effects of substance abuse among young people? Are we doomed to be over-run by the drug culture that can hold even governments to ransom?

## **(10) Caribbean Integration**

It is patently obvious that Caribbean integration in an era of globalization is inevitable. It is a beautiful idea whose time is coming. But are we ready for the movement of large numbers of people and goods freely and efficiently throughout the region?

Are we ready to receive immigrant workers from neighbouring countries, even when they are descendents of previous migrants from the receiving countries? What kind of reception do the grandchildren of Mr. Alleyne who went to Guyana or St. Lucia 40 years ago get when they turn up at Grantley Adams International Airport in Barbados? For that matter what kind of reception do returning nationals who were born in the country get when they return home after spending 30 or more years in Europe or America?

How ready are we for the CARICOM single market and economy? What will we have to sell to each other if we are all producing the same things? Even if we start producing goods and services for which each country has a comparative advantage, how are we going to get it from A to B? How can I get bananas that are overflowing in St. Vincent and St. Lucia to Barbados where I pay almost a dollar for a single one? What is the state of marine transport in the Caribbean?

Above all how many of our young people are being pointed in the direction of business as a career? How many of our young people

have dropped out of education because they did not become the doctor or lawyer their parents and teachers had in mind while they were educating them?

What will happen to our young people who have been conditioned to get a job when those jobs are being done by people from neighbouring countries and from as far away as Asia at a fraction of the wages that the local worker expects?

My friends the extent of xenophobia, the fear and contempt for the foreigner, is so great across the region, that I feel that unless a massive education programme is introduced there will be blood on our streets.

***I believe that nothing short of a crusade can save us from any combination of these disasters listed above.***

What is needed is an army of change agents. We need people who are willing to think and act outside the box. We need people who, when they come to a cross-roads are willing to consider doing the opposite of what their impulse, based on the kind of socialization they have had, tells them to do. We need people who are strong enough to go in a direction opposite to the one in which the herd is rushing. The consequence of a significant number of people doing this is what Thomas Kuhn (in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*)

calls a "Paradigm shift". This is when a scientific community succumbs to overwhelming evidence and shifts from one theory or perspective to another. ***There is now enough evidence for us to believe that the traditional way of educating and bringing up our youth is wrong...wrong...wrong.***

I believe that young people, during the period of transition from childhood to adulthood are best suited for the role of change agent. As newcomers to adult society they feel most intensely the pressure to conform. On a daily basis they live through the trauma of the collision of their perception of reality and their dreams of the future with the established norms carrying all the cultural baggage from the past. And because they have no sentimental attachment to the status quo they would shed no tears to let it go.

The truth is that those of us who are products of a bloody and oppressive past have little to teach young people about coping with the challenges of the present or creating a brighter future. Frankly we just do not have the answers. What can we tell our children about a Black identity when we were brought up stupid under the Union Jack? What can we teach our youth who are confronted with the threat of HIV/AIDS during the child-bearing period of their lives? What can we say to them about creating wealth and employment through enterprise when we have spent our entire lives doing jobs?

What can we advise them about the Caribbean when we do not **know** the neighbouring countries?

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, instead of telling children and young people, what they should do, we should encourage them to adopt a problem-solving approach to life, and create the conditions for them to experiment with solutions. My friends, I am speaking about a new approach to education that allows students to bring projects and problems to the classroom, instead of coming to slavishly follow a curriculum. **I am speaking about interest-based education.**

And where do we go from here? We cannot rely on the hide-bound and sacrosanct education system to change over-night. What is needed is a new institution that offers young people choice in areas of interest and exploration. All the ten challenges described above should be of consuming interest to them.

We therefore need a programme that is based on an honest admission that we want young people to participate fully in an effort to solve problems that really belong to them. **We need to give them a sense of ownership.**

At the same time we must release them from social bondage and empower them to take responsibility for their own salvation. We need to help them break out of the political and economic confines that have frustrated their development and that of their communities.

For example, let us take two vital social institutions from which young people are debarred. Consider politics. How can we justify telling young people to stay away from politics, when this is the primary institution through which the nation's resources are distributed? Why do you think that the needs of young people are not addressed? If you are not at the table when the cake is being sliced up, you cannot expect to get more than the crumbs that fall from it. Politics permeate every area of our lives and young people have the right to participate, particularly because they constitute the largest voting block in most developing countries.

Another institution in which the participation of young people is minimal is the economy. Not only are they marginalized through unemployment, but also because they do not have access to resources to create wealth. And so most discussions with young people end with the admission that there is really nothing that can be done to change things.

The truth is that young people constitute the most powerful resource in any country. **This huge reservoir of energy and creativity is**

dammed up by a culture of scarcity and regulated by money. If only young people could grasp the feasibility of volunteering their services for work done in exchange for other goods and services produced by young people in the same cartel, the problem could be solved. Instead of waiting for money to get things done, young people could apply their energy and talents to problems that confront them and use a local currency as a means of exchange. I am here speaking of a sophisticated form of multi-party barter, which is known as Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) and which has been used extensively in Japan and Europe to reconstruct their communities after the destruction of World War II, when money was scarce.

I believe that an institution that is based on choice, that values life-long learning and encourages young people to think outside the box and to take responsibility for their own future is desperately needed in the Caribbean. **I believe that this institution should be handed to young people to manage with appropriate contributions from other stakeholders.....** and I believe that the proposed voluntary **National Youth Service Programme** that is being refined in preparation for implementation in many countries of the region is that institution.

Thank you and good night.