

7 March 2008, Friday  
Rt Hon Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary-General  
CARICOM Meeting, Nassau, Bahamas

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### **The Commonwealth and the Caribbean**

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for this opportunity to address this Caribbean Community, for the last time.

I recall my first CARICOM Summit in July 2000 on Canouan Island in St Vincent and the Grenadines. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think my fellow Commonwealth survivors from that time are Denzil Douglas, Hubert Ingraham, Bharrat Jagdeo and Keith Mitchell. I salute you all.

Today I feel that I am amongst good and trusted friends. And I feel as welcome amongst those of you who are *not* Commonwealth members, as amongst the 12 of you who are.

Indeed it was in July last year in St Kitts when a *non*-Commonwealth country, newly returned to CARICOM (Haiti, in the person of Rene Preval) so passionately spoke, in French that I managed to understand, about his country's struggle to match those two great pillars of the modern Commonwealth: Democracy and Development. It was a powerful moment.

From when I first started coming to this region as New Zealand Foreign Minister in the 1990s, and when later I asked for your support as I presented my credentials to be Commonwealth Secretary-General, I have felt your warmth and support, and I thank you for that.

The New Zealand cricket team was doing very badly at the time, so perhaps you might have felt sorry for me!

The Caribbean has got under and into my skin, and more importantly into the blood stream of the Commonwealth. A roll-call of names will attest to that.

There was Sir Sonny Ramphal, one of my predecessors as Commonwealth Secretary-General, to whom the people of Zimbabwe and post-apartheid South Africa owe such a debt.

People like Michael Manley, Eric Williams and Eugenia Charles were instrumental in making the Modern Commonwealth the great global good that it is today. All fought long and hard for what they believed in.

In recent years, other great sons like PJ Patterson, Owen Arthur and Rex Nettleford have been at the heart of Commonwealth thinking and planning – about rebinding fractured societies, admitting new members, pursuing and opening up trade, and more.

I myself have been served by two exceptional Caribbean Deputy Secretaries-General – first Winston Cox of Barbados, and now Ransford Smith of Jamaica. The lilting, eloquent, classically educated elegant voices of Caribbean colleagues are never far from me in the Secretariat in London.

Many of you will also know Juliet Solomon, who is with me today. Juliet tells me that she remembers the distinct impression that I made up my mind to hire her because she talked knowledgeably about cricket!

And yet of course our shared dealings go far, far beyond a few luminary people, and the exchanges we have had around this CARICOM table.

### **The Commonwealth & the Caribbean side-by-side – the practice**

The Commonwealth and the Caribbean stand side-by-side at many levels.

Most obviously, in the impetus that we give to development in the Caribbean, to the tune of some US\$16 million in the last five years in individual countries – a figure which almost doubles when we include pan-Commonwealth and pan-Caribbean programmes.

A quarter of all our Commonwealth funds are spent here. For every dollar that you put into our Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, you get five back. A great rate of return.

Now isn't the time to recount all of those projects, other than to say that the very smallest-scale assistance can make the largest difference. Here in the Bahamas, a Sierra Leonean works as the senior Parliamentary counsel.

A chief engineer from Sri Lanka has been assigned to Dominica's Water and Sewage Company; a speech therapist from the UK advises special education schools in Jamaica.

The Commonwealth makes more headlines in this region with its support for your trade negotiating positions, both in the WTO and with the EU (and I am pleased that April will mark a result and a new departure for this region in its EPA). Or with our debt management programmes. Or the way we have helped develop new national export strategies, regional tourism plans and regional public administration networks.

Some of you will be familiar with the Commonwealth Youth Programme office in Georgetown, and its work across the region – including the network of some 200 Commonwealth Young Ambassadors for Positive Living in Guyana, the Bahamas and St Lucia. These are brave and inspired young HIV-positive people, who talk to their peers in schools, clubs and communities, educating about how to stop the spread of AIDS, and how to embrace and support those who have it.

More of you will know of the elections we have observed over the last few years in Antigua and Barbuda, St Kitts and Nevis, Guyana and Belize, and the work which my special envoy Sir Paul Reeves did in contributing to Guyana's impressively peaceful elections in September 2006.

And *last* September, you may have followed the way that Kenny Anthony led the Commonwealth Observer Mission in Sierra Leone, where the Commonwealth has played so central a role in transforming and renewing that country. David Thompson has led Commonwealth Expert Teams to elections in Swaziland and St Kitts and Nevis. KD Knight has led our teams in Fiji and Belize.

Our Commonwealth work here in the Caribbean typifies our work across the continents and oceans.

In one sentence, I believe the last 8 years have seen us become *stronger* as an organisation of values; *stronger* as an organisation relevant to its time; *stronger* in our focus on and results for those who need us most; and *stronger* as an organization that looks out on the world, and works with others to meet its many challenges.

### **The Caribbean and how the Commonwealth can help – the challenges**

This region certainly faces challenges. History has dealt it a difficult hand. I spoke about them at the University of the West Indies in Kingston this time last year.

Many of them, I said, are those common to small states, with all their vulnerabilities. And as you know, the Commonwealth has pioneered the scientific study of small states, and brought the World Bank with it.

Only this week, you should have received my letter about my latest steps towards setting up a Commonwealth Small States Office in Geneva, much in the way that we have one at the UN in New York. I hope you will help us take this forward.

In this room today, we all know that the challenges are best met collectively – amongst yourselves, and amongst the international community which stands ready to help you. For instance ...

You will achieve more in the WTO and in Brussels with a united CARICOM voice.

You will achieve more in keeping your doctors and teachers at home if you coordinate your Caribbean relations with the countries to whom your people migrate, like the US, Canada and the UK. Our Commonwealth Recruitment Protocols can give form to those discussions.

You will prevail against crime if you continue to help each other – much as Trinidad and Tobago did recently for Guyana, for instance, in helping the hunt for those who carried out the massacres in Lusignan and Bartica – and by seeing where organisations like the Commonwealth can assist.

### **The Caribbean and how the Commonwealth can help – the potential**

So you, as any region, have your challenges. Bananas, sugar, offshore banking, tourism, and so on. You've known the highs and lows of them all.

Your economic success can still only be built on your human and natural resources, and on the geographical advantage of sitting between two continents.

Your political success will continue to be built on a deep-seated Caribbean commitment to democracy, reaching back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In the last 12 months the Caribbean has seen peaceful and constructive changes of government here in the Bahamas, in Belize, Barbados, Jamaica and St Lucia.

The Commonwealth continues to stand with you in *entrenching* this democratic culture. Whether we are running our Government and Opposition workshops, or strengthening electoral commissions and parliaments, we are deepening what you already have, and want.

These are facts that you can sell to the rest of the world. I say that democracy is a journey, and a work in progress for *all* our Commonwealth members. The Caribbean knows that it can do better, for instance, in giving women a stronger democratic voice.

As you know, only one of our Commonwealth members, Grenada, meets the target of having 30% of women in Parliament. However well your women have done in areas like education and public sector work, they are not adequately represented in your Parliaments or Assemblies.

Your Excellencies, I have spoken of the strength of the relationship between the Caribbean and the wider Commonwealth; and I have spoken of the strength and potential of this region. In November 2009, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will come to the Caribbean and to Port of Spain in

particular: it will see a strong and vibrant Caribbean; our leaders will feel very much at home.

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What fish and chips are to the English, it seems poetry and cricket are to the people of these islands. I am a politician, and cricket is a microcosm of life, so I understand CLR James when he wrote, and I quote,

‘Cricket had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics, I didn’t have too much to learn’.

The Caribbean – *you* – have taught me much about both. I am enriched by it. I shall always be grateful.

Mr Chair, fellow leaders, Mr Secretary-General, colleagues. Thank you and, as they say in Jamaica, “Walk Good”.

**ENDS**