

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

AT

**FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF THE
INDEPENDENCE OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE
BAHAMAS**

"THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATION BUILDING"

BY

**THE RT. HON. OWEN S. ARTHUR, M.P.
FORMER PRIME MINISTER OF BARBADOS**

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It is good that the people of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas have chosen to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of their Independence in this reflective and positive way.

Our region is now mired in arguably one of the most debilitating crises in its crisis-ridden history.

We have known more confident times.

Indeed, you celebrate your Independence against the backdrop of a pervasive and deepening pessimism across the region that the Independence experience has spun off in a direction that runs counter to the excited expectations that greeted the raising of the respective national flags less than a generation ago.

However, if, as I know you do, you understand the obligations of history, you will appreciate that this is not a moment to doubt yourself.

The obligations of history to which I refer, and which will constitute a significant part of the theme of my address, have been wonderfully well captured by George Lamming in "*The Sovereignty of the Imagination*":

"This region has been staggering slowly and painfully to resolve the contradiction of being at once independent and neo-colonial; struggling through new definitions of itself to abandon the protection of being a frontier created by nature, a logistical basis serving some imperial necessity, and struggling to move away from being a regional platform for alien enterprise to the status of being a region for itself, with its own sovereign right to define its own reality and to order its own priorities."

The interpretation which must be placed on this is that Independence has placed on us the obligation, which perhaps has never rested so heavily on people in any other region, to create societies in the fullest sense of the word.

The obligation is to build societies, which rest on the strong and sound capital of a secure sense of identity, kinship, community and shared values, and is supported by strong and viable economies that are capable of progressively meeting the material needs of the people, all within the context of the attainment of social justice for all.

This is what the philosophy of nation building for us in this region must be about.

And we must not fail to grasp the significance of the obligation to be the pioneers, as the first generation of nation builders, in the long march towards the eventual creation of strong and successful societies.

Indeed, for a long period of time, the tawdry verdict of many observers, as expressed by visitors like Trollope and Froude, has been that we are not truly a society. It has been said of us:

"There has been romance, but it has been the romance of pirates and outlaws. The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions. There have been no saints in the West Indies since Las Casas; no hero unless psuedo-negro enthusiasm can make one of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word with a character and purpose of their own."

Of more recent vintage, and closer to home, V.S. Naipaul has referred to his homeland as one of the many "half-made societies of the colonial world"; and as a "simple philistine society"; and he opined in 1971, that he "no longer imagined the West Indies to be a real place."

If we conceive of nation building as imposing on us the obligation to create cohesive and coherent societies, then the philosophy which guides such an endeavour should have certain special features.

The first is that, from a philosophical point of view, nation building in the Caribbean must be made to transcend the narrow boundaries of ideology and "isms".

I remember being in Kingston, Jamaica on May 12, 1976, when Michael Manley set out his philosophy of nation building for Jamaica within the context of the ideology of Democratic Socialism.

However, by 1997, in an exchange of letters with Kari Levitt, in "*Small Axe*", he spoke of the dangers of having the kinds of societal transformations required of societies such as Jamaica confined too rigidly by an adherence to an ideological dogma.

Secondly, nation building, in today's world has come to be perceived and projected as essentially a physical phenomenon, associated with the efforts of powerful countries to restore, rebuild, and to bring order to war-torn societies. Such a philosophical perspective is too narrow for our purposes.

Rather, the philosophy of nation building for our times and purposes, without eschewing ideological and physical considerations, must capture and define the forces which must be at the centre of and bring forth the kind of societal transformations of which Lamming spoke.

In considering the forces which can promote and sustain nation building in Caribbean societies, I would certainly put a premium on the development and enhancement of the social capital.

The evidence is now overwhelming that the stock of a society's social capital – the norms, interpersonal trust, its social networks and organizations which are created when groups and organizations develop the capacity to work together for mutually productive gain – makes the decisive gain as to whether a society transforms positively or not. Sustained investment in enriching the quality of the social capital in areas such as education, training and health is a related imperative of nation building.

You may ask why the premium on social capital. The simple answer is that a nation cannot be built unless the effort is rested on the strong foundation of a common and shared sense of identity and community.

Historically, such a shared sense of community was not always prevalent in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. I, however, believe it is safe to say that a major aspect of the Bahamian success to date has been generated by the strength of the spirit of community that has been fostered in so many respects since Independence.

That having been said, it is equally important to recognise that it is precisely the social capital that is being exposed to threat by developments in the global society.

For, globalisation has exposed the typical Caribbean nation not just to new technological forces, but also to new cultural influences which are already beginning to shape the nature of the

society in which we live. In this respect, a new culture of excessive individualism, the notion of no limits on social behavior and the exposure of the Caribbean people to lifestyles and consumption habits that bear no relationship to our resource endowment are already taking root among us. Unchecked they will lead to social disintegration that will make nation building more difficult to attain.

The second important aspect of the philosophy of nation building must be its articulation of appropriate concepts and tools of development that can be pressed into service in the successful transformation of the respective societies.

The core business of nation building in the Caribbean must be the **business of development**, since the respective countries have all embarked on their independent journey from the starting point as underdeveloped societies.

Development, in such a context, must entail the process by which the society, through all of the agencies at its disposal, creatively utilise all of its resources to successfully expand its capacity to meet the material, social and other needs of its people, and to do so in a manner that leads to the attainment of social justice.

Given the point at which the race to development in the Caribbean started, there is a very special sense in which the concept of development as espoused by Amartyra Sen has relevance and direct application to our circumstances.

He saw development as freedom, and argued that democracy is both the object of development itself, as well as the means that engenders economic growth.

No one familiar with the Bahamian experience would challenge that thesis.

For your post-Independence experience has been characterized by the replacement of the pre-existing authoritarian and undemocratic political and social systems, which concentrated social and economic opportunity in favour of the privileged few, with an alternative experience which is making Bahamas a society of opportunity for the many.

To be meaningful, the quest for development must therefore continue to tap into the desire for freedom that engrosses the energy of men and women who come from below; the quest for freedom from hunger, joblessness, disease and deprivation.

As such, to support this quest for freedom, we must continue to rewrite the statute books to confer opportunities on women, workers and other groups who have historically faced conditions of special disadvantage. For in the final analysis nation building must entail the process by which the creative potential of all the people is released and respect for the dignity of all citizens is assured.

In a word, nation building must entail the building of a new heritage of freedom in societies where the old heritage of slavery and tyranny still lingers.

In all of this, an important aspect of nation building which must never be given too little priority is the need in the Caribbean to build sound and strong economies, through the use of realistic policies and programmes that can bring about their continued transformation.

It is indeed impossible to conceive of a successful society which does not have at its core a strong and dynamic economy.

Yet, across the Caribbean there have been too many instances of developmental failure because the refusal to accept the fact that ambitious programmes for social engineering can only be sustained in growing and robust economies.

Today, I cannot overemphasise the need for Caribbean societies to pay attention to the purely economic aspects of nation building.

Across the Caribbean, there is growing evidence that the spectre and status of failed societies can become the lot of some of our independent nations by reason simply of their inability to master their economic affairs.

For, the Caribbean is now characterized by increasing economic tensions and turmoil as are reflected in the prevalence of anemic growth, unsustainable fiscal positions, rising unemployment and poverty, unmanageable debt and a general lack of economic dynamism.

In some quarters it has become fashionable to put the blame for this state of affairs solely on global recession. We would however do well to remember that Independence conferred on Caribbean States the right of self-determination. Caribbean States are

therefore in no position to assert that they have been innocent or passive bystanders in moulding their own destinies.

I choose to offer an alternative perspective.

An economy is just another species of social organisation. And as we know, in nature species have been known to fail if they become too specialised, if they lose their habitat; or are too slow to make the adjustments necessary to adapt to changes in the environment in which they operate.

In this regard it is beyond dispute that the environment within which the development of Caribbean societies has been taking place has been subject to dramatic transformation.

In short order, the region has had to move from operating in the world of trade preferences to the age of trade reciprocity. It has had to come to terms with living in the new Information Age without making the appropriate changes to do so. Many nation

States, at an early stage in their development, have lost access to sources of concessional financing. In the post cold war era, the region has also been confronted with the reality of geopolitical marginalization. As such, it has been left to its own devices and made a case of unassisted development, since, in the new dispensation, it is neither a threat to global security, nor a basket-case requiring special assistance. In addition, large, new claims have been made on the resources available to the State and the society at large, to confront new challenges such as environmental degradation, new threats to national security, global warming and the like. Also, our economies continue to be affected by rules originating from the WTO and the OECD in a manner that was not contemplated on the attainment of Independence.

Nation building in such an environment of dramatic change must be informed by a philosophy, supported by proactive policies and programmes, to mitigate the incidence of the new threats while

maximizing the benefits which are also being thrown up by new opportunities.

Indeed, the region will continue to languish if a harmonious balance is not sought and found to dealing with threats and opportunities as a single undertaking. This is what strategic planning seeks to achieve. As such, if ever there was a need for a recourse to Strategic Planning, that time is now.

Yet few Caribbean societies have sought to address the challenges of the era by devising Strategic Plans. And some of those that have been devised, notably that of Barbados, are being honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

I could not leave this subject of the economics of nation building and the philosophy which should guide it without touching on two matters which tend to be badly mangled.

The first concerns the fight to eradicate poverty. This effort must be at the centre of any programme of nation building.

But there has entirely been too great a tendency to romanticise this struggle. Poverty has many dimensions, including the psychological. As such the effort to eradicate it must be multi-dimensional. But those who have truly felt the pinch of poverty have a very clear perspective of their predicament. For them, it is largely a material phenomenon; they don't have enough and they want more.

A large part of the answer to poverty must therefore come from the increased production of goods and services – a process known in the language of economies as growth.

But there has always been the tendency to put the emphasis on the qualitative, more sociological aspects of the struggle, rather than to highlight the extent to which economic growth per se can

be a factor which can make a decisive difference. It all has to do with philosophy.

By a similar token, the philosophy of nation building in the Caribbean, has not always been the most propitious in dealing with issues regarding the creation of enterprises.

Indeed, given our peculiar history, merit has often been attached to the opinion of Balzac that every great fortune begins with a crime.

Nation building in the Caribbean must however rest on philosophical underpinnings that appreciate the importance of an appropriate enterprise culture. For, the great challenge that confronts the Caribbean is to create an environment conducive to the expansion of existing enterprises and the creation of new ones. Another related challenge is to create an environment where enterprises can last more than one generation. An even greater philosophical challenge is to champion the creation of

small businesses today in the hope and expectation that they will become the big businesses of tomorrow.

Sadly, such a maturity has yet to invade or inform the policies or programmes used to build enterprise in the region.

The bottom line is that a record is kept of the number of new small businesses that are created. There is no similar record kept of the number of existing small businesses that make the transition to become big businesses.

To build our nations, that psychological barrier must be crossed.

I would also wish to touch on three additional subjects which I believe must be taken into account in constructing an appropriate philosophy and practice for nation building.

The first has to do with governance.

In 1999, in an address to the UWI on the economic options for the Caribbean in the 21st Century, I cited the need for the region to embrace a new form of inclusive governance that rules out partisan tribalism, the concentration of power in the hands of ruling elites, and the distribution of the fruits of economic progress on a partisan basis.

I said then, and I assert again, that such forces serve only to ensure that at any given time, at least half of the population is marginalized and alienated from participation in national development.

Regrettably nation building in the Caribbean continue to be undermined by a philosophical approach to governance that has served the region poorly. In my time as a leader, I called attention for the need to practice the politics of inclusion.

Today, I would add to my discourse of 1999 the need to focus on consensus building as an important part of nation building.

The wonderful thing about exercising responsibility for the affairs of small societies is that there is only a few strategic things that have to be mastered. Once a consensus can be created on those key few strategic matters, and a sense of ownership of that consensus enjoyed by the State and the members and agencies of the Civil Society, the task of nation building becomes that much easier.

To use an example, in Barbados a consensus was developed as to the manner in which our social security system had to be reformed to ensure its viability over the long-term. That reform was successfully executed. In the absence of a similar consensus the USA struggles to reform social security.

By a similar token, it was difficult to reach a consensus about the transformation of Barbados into a Republic. And today, as is the case in other Caribbean countries, there is no consensus regarding the programme of fiscal consolidation that has to be

undertaken to restore order to the public finances. Little progress on this critical matter is therefore being made.

My reading of Michael Crafton's *"Life and Times of Pindling"* suggests that nation building in the Bahamas can benefit from the forging of national consensus on the key things that matter to the nation's development.

The second matter concerns the need for us to pursue what Sonny Ramphal has called the compulsions of regional engagement.

I have thus far not extended the concept of "nation" to embrace the region and its Diaspora. But without such a philosophical disposition, nation building in the Caribbean will be a lost and futile exercise.

Indeed, the case of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas bears out the point. It would be impossible to conceive of the successful

development of most of the islands which constitute your nation state outside the context of their participation in the larger administrative unit that is your Commonwealth.

The same holds true for most of the countries in the region. The price of insular nationalism has been onerous. The cost of separate national development has been such that maintaining viable economies and societies is proving to be a task that is spiralling out of the reach of most Caribbean Societies.

Nation building in the Caribbean therefore has to be driven, not by the present retreat from regional engagement but by the philosophical commitment to make the region succeed by deploying more effective forms of region co-operation.

Finally, in addressing issues concerning the philosophy of nation building, it is important to understand that it has a psychological dimension.

No matter how small a country is, it can and should occupy a position of dignity among the family of nations.

It must stand for something.

In the history of mankind, the most dignified aspect of the human condition has been the capacity of societies, no matter how simple, to provide justice to their own, from within.

Throughout the Caribbean, the functioning of our judiciary has been one of the most dignified aspect of the Caribbean civilisation.

Indeed, this country has known what it is to have a Jamaican serve as its Chief Justice.

There is therefore no good reason why we should not provide justice for our people, as an indigenous exercise, without having to look to the former colonial master for assistance. And there is

every good reason why this should be undertaken as a cooperative regional effort.

It is therefore a very shameful condition that, having created a Caribbean Court of Justice, there is such a great resistance in the region to accepting its full jurisdiction.

Barbados, historically judged to be among the most British of all Caribbean States, has readily accepted the jurisdiction of the Court.

I assure you that the administration and dispensation of justice in my country have not been diminished, not even by a remote iota. This fortifies me in the view that once we maintain the appropriate strong, positive philosophical disposition to all matters concerning the building of our nations, we will surely succeed.

If the verdict of the great philosophies of history is anything to go by, we have much to look forward to as Small States.

For Plato, the new utopia was to be named Magnesia. *"It was to be a small State in a country which afforded its inhabitants a decent, but not luxurious standard of living. Its relatively small size encouraged intimacy and friendship among its inhabitants. Its modest living standards ensured sobriety and moderation and discouraged excesses and debauchery. And its remote situation should deter visitors from abroad, such as sailors and traders who are potential sources of discord."*

Sounds like the Commonwealth of the Bahamas to me.

Happy Independence!

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