



REMARKS BY

THE RT. HON. PERRY G. CHRISTIE

PRIME MINISTER

COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

AT THE OPENING CEREMONY FOR

THE TWENTY-SIXTH INTER-SESSIONAL MEETING OF

THE CONFERENCE OF HEADS OF GOVERNMENT

OF THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY

26TH FEBRUARY 2015

MELIA HOTEL,

NASSAU, THE BAHAMAS

Your Excellency Dame Marguerite Pindling,

Governor-General

of the Commonwealth

of The Bahamas

**Your Excellencies Colleague Heads of State and Government of the
Caribbean Community**

The Honourable Chief Justice of The Bahamas,

Mr. Hartman Longley,

Honourable Members of the Cabinet,

**Honourable Members of the Senate and Members of the
Honourable House of Assembly,**

Former Prime Minister of Jamaica,

The Most Honourable P. J. Patterson,

Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community,

His Excellency Irwin Larocque,

Director-General of the Food and Administrative Organisation,

Dr. Jose Graziano Da Silva

Dean and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Members of the Consular Corps,

Secretary to the Cabinet,

Mr. Wendell Major

**Permanent Secretaries, Financial Secretary, and other senior
government officials**

CARICOM Delegates & Other Specially Invited Guests

Ladies & Gentleman:

Good morning.

It was a very proud moment for me to assume the role of Chairman of Conference of the Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community for the period 1st January 2015 to 30th June 2015. It is also a very proud moment for me, my Government and the people of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas to have the honour of hosting this Twenty-Sixth Inter-Sessional Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community here in Nassau.

In the words of an old Bahamian song:

Welcome to “Little Nassau”!

I wish to welcome my fellow Heads of Government to The Bahamas. We have had the opportunity for many fruitful exchanges over the past month through our participation in the Summits for CELAC-China,

Caricom-Cuba, CARICOM-US and the CELAC Heads of Government and State.

I would also like to extend best wishes to the immediate past Prime Minister of the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis, the Rt. Honourable Dr. Denzil Douglas, who had served as Head of Government for twenty consecutive years, a feat none of us in here has achieved – at least not yet!

I also wish to extend a warm welcome to our newest colleague Head of Government, the Honourable Timothy Harris, the new Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis. On behalf of the Caribbean Community, I congratulate him on his recent success at the polls and I extend best wishes to him and his colleagues. Like the rest of us, he has the challenging task of steering his nation toward a path of sustainable development for the good of all.

It would be remiss of me not to thank and congratulate my immediate predecessor, the Honourable Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, for his outstanding performance as Chair of the Conference during the second half of 2014. Indeed, his performance was all the more remarkable having regard to the fact that he was catapulted into the office of Chair barely two weeks before his first CARICOM Heads of Government Conference.

On a sombre note, I wish to express our collective sympathies and condolences to the Government and People of the Republic of Haiti on the tragic incident that took place on 17th February 2015 at the Carnival Float Parade resulting in the loss of lives and the infliction of serious injuries. Please join with me in observing a moment of silence.

Thank you

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Colleague Heads,

The mandate of CARICOM leaders to address the common goal of a sustained developmental path for the common man and woman precipitated my proposal that we discuss the topic of *Leveraging CARICOM's Human, Cultural and Natural Resources for the Economic Development of the Community*.

I will be seeking at this meeting a regional commitment to greater investment and attention to Education, Culture and Sports.

The Strategic Plan for the Community that was approved at our Thirty-Fifth Regular Meeting in Antigua and Barbuda had identified the creative and service industries as key economies for the Region.

The world-wide recognition and acclaim of Bob Marley, the Mighty Sparrow, Sir Sidney Poitier, Sir Garfield Sobers, Lenny Kravitz, Rihanna, Usain Bolt, Ato Boldon, Shelly-Anne “The Pocket Rocket” Fraser-Price, Veronica Campbell-Brown, The Golden Girls 4 X 100 relay team, The Golden Knights 4 X 400 relay team, The West Indies Cricket Team, Derek Walcott, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticat and our own Marion Bethel, and those giants of towering intellect who are no longer with us like Franz Fanon, Eric Williams, Sir Arthur Lewis, C.L.R. James and Rex Nettleford, and so many others, both living and dead, collectively show us and the world that our region has the depth and diversity of human capital needed to drive our societies forward.

But while we recognize and applaud the triumphs of those that I have singled out by name and others like them, the question remains: What about the rest of us; what about the rest of our societies?

How many unrealised dreams and goals do our people possess? This Caribbean Community of ours is blessed with an extensive sporting, cultural and intellectual heritage but how do we develop ourselves more fully and broadly?

Colleague Heads, you would recall that on the occasion of the CELAC-China Summit which was held in Beijing last month, I stated that if we do not address the challenges faced by our young people, we do so at our grave peril.

We began this process in 2010 in Suriname with a Summit on Youth Development. The time is optimal for us to be active in implementing

the ideas drawn from the youth themselves and contained in the Declaration of Paramaribo on the future of youth in the Caribbean.

In that Declaration we agreed to support actions aimed at empowering and developing youth in the region. We have done the research. We have the views of the youth. Let us take the necessary action to deliver on the provision of Paramaribo and ensure that tomorrow's leaders are academically, socially and mentally ready for building on the policies of yesteryear.

In tandem with that we must also ensure that female empowerment is a priority not only as a "moral imperative" but also as a social necessity. In this latter regard, it is a statistical fact that over fifty percent of our families are run by single mothers. Recognizing, as we do, that the family is the most basic, most fundamental, building block of society, the case for female empowerment, inclusive of full equality for women

in relation to their male counterparts, is therefore too compelling to countenance any serious dissension.

But beyond that paradigm, let us remember the saying, *To be human and to be happy, you have to have something to look forward to.*

Such is the cry of the young today, be they male or female, from as far south as Guyana and Suriname, to as far north as The Bahamas – and everywhere else in between!

Our challenge, our mandate, our imperative, is to show our young people, that we, as leaders, care about who they are, where they are and what they are doing, and that we are determined to develop sound and viable strategies for helping them make their futures brighter than they may appear right now.

Let me tell you a story. On my return from the CELAC-China meetings in China my delegation visited Sir Sidney Poitier at his home in Los Angeles. He told us a story about a defining intervention in his life that he thought should be a teachable moment for us and for leaders of our region.

He said he was employed as a dishwasher in a restaurant in New York and one evening after the customers had left and he had finished washing the dishes a Jewish waiter saw him looking at a newspaper and asked him what was he doing and he replied I am trying to read. He said when the waiter realized he could not read he offered to teach him to read each night after the restaurant had closed.

Sir Sidney tearfully said that intervention changed his life completely, enabling him to go on to win two Oscars, to become a director and producer of movies and plays and an author.

He then said the challenge for my Government and Governments of the region is to recognize that there are other Sidney Poitiers who are waiting for an intervention that would transform their lives and impact positively their country.

With that view in mind, Colleague Heads, I am delighted that P. J. Patterson will lead discussions on this topic. It is so vitally important that we identify practical, sustainable methodologies for strengthening and enriching the human capital of our Region. I am so pleased that our dear friend and brother has agreed be here with us. A special thank you, P.J!

GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT

Relations with the United States, the region's most important trading and security partner, are evolving. We note with satisfaction the pronouncements that the United States is willing to show greater flexibility on the issue of GDP per capita as a determinant for concessional financing for development. This is also the enunciated position of Japan as well.

During our meeting with the US Vice President, Joe Biden, on 26th January 2015, the United States announced that they will no longer block concessional financing to middle income countries from the International Financial Institutions as it relates to energy and climate change-related financing, based on GDP per capita thresholds.

The United States also proposed at our meeting in Washington with Vice President Biden a meeting on citizen security and The Bahamas has agreed to host such a meeting sometime next month. I look forward to welcoming that assembly in Nassau.

ENERGY

In CARICOM's ongoing energy talks with the US, practical areas that the region should negotiate with the US on include:

- (a) the issue of funding without conditionalities;
- (b) the facilitation of the export of liquefied natural gas (LNG); and
- (c) holding our traditional partner to the stated commitments outlined in the Caribbean Energy Security Initiative of the United States.

The January CARICOM-US talks on Energy also focused on the promotion of investment opportunities in energy, forestry, mining, infrastructure development, tourism, airline services, financial services, agriculture and fisheries.

We are acutely conscious of the fact that the Energy sector has direct and profound implications for economic development. Most of the Caribbean is non-industrialized and heavily dependent on Tourism. Energy costs have a direct effect on pricing and this can affect competitiveness as it relates to the Caribbean's niche in global tourism.

Colleague Heads, I therefore entreat you to continue your support for the launching of the Caribbean Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency. In this endeavour, while we continue to strengthen cooperation with traditional partners, we would also be looking to develop new partnerships with other regional groupings.

COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Colleague Heads, as I turn to the issue of the operations and sustainability of our Community Institutions, it is with great concern that I note the situation with the Caribbean Knowledge Learning Network Agency and, more specifically, the Caribnet project.

I anticipate that my Colleague Prime Minister with portfolio responsibility for Information and Communication Technology, the Rt. Honourable Keith Mitchell, will offer further information on this matter, so I say no more on it at this stage.

On a related matter, the precarious financial situation at the CARICOM Secretariat necessitates some frank and sober talks in Caucus. The issue of the financial sustainability of Community institutions is an issue that

we can no longer afford to defer. It needs resolution on an urgent basis. We must summon the political will to make this happen!

Before I proceed any further, however, I wish to express my gratitude and personal thanks, and the thanks of my Colleague Heads, to His Excellency Irwin LaRoque, Secretary-General of the CARICOM Secretariat and his staff for their immensely helpful support and advice over the years. Secretary-General, you have done a yeoman's service. I heartily commend you for your service to the Caribbean Community.

RELATIONS IN THE REGION

Colleague Heads, the simultaneous announcement by President Barack Obama and President Raul Castro on 17th December 2014 of the commencement of the normalisation of diplomatic relations and economic ties between the United States and the Republic of Cuba sent

welcome reverberations throughout the Region and indeed the world. The Region celebrated with Cuba when President Obama confirmed that America will cut loose the shackles of its past and seek a better future for the people of Cuba and America. The two countries will open talks aimed at restoring full diplomatic relations and the opening of an Embassy in Havana for the first time in more than a half a century.

With a view to strengthening our relations with our sister nation and in fidelity to the principle of South-South cooperation, I reiterate that sooner rather than later, CARICOM should engage in feasibility surveys with a view to developing multi-destination tourism initiatives with Cuba.

DOMESTIC ECONOMY

Another important pillar of our respective economies is Agriculture. In this regard, I wish to heartily welcome the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, Dr. Jose Graziano Da Silva and the Ministers of Agriculture of CARICOM Member States to The Bahamas. I trust that the site visit to The Bahamas Agriculture and Marine Science Institute (BAMSI) yesterday went well. For the benefit of those who may not be aware, BAMSI is a site on our largest island, Andros that is intended to be one of the major food production centres of our nation in the future. It includes an agricultural and marine sciences school that provides both theoretical and practical instruction for its students.

Currently, The Bahamas imports almost everything that we eat, a situation that is common in many CARICOM nations. Our annual food import bill is approximately one billion United States dollars. My Government has decided that it is time that “*we grow what we can and*

only buy what we must". Let me repeat this for emphasis because this should be the mantra of all CARICOM states: "*we must grow what we can and only buy what we must*".

BAMSI is a 20 million dollar investment. It will become the tool to demonstrate that we can substantially cut into our huge food import bill. Over the next two (2) years, it is envisioned that we will reduce food import by 20% in as many as 30 imported crops and, in time, through our value added strategy, improve that percentage incrementally.

Tying this in with our mandate to enhance our human capital, my Government is committed to eliminating the perceived stigma of back yard farming amongst idle youth and highlighting the prestige and longevity of a career in agriculture, marine resources and other spin-off economic industries.

CONCLUSION

Colleague Heads,

It is my fervent hope that we have meaningful discussions and make binding commitments on all of the issues that fall under our remit at this meeting. It is my fervent prayer that we leave this Conference with a renewed commitment to instituting domestic programmes and providing an enabling environment to create the *Leveraging of CARICOM's Human, Cultural and Natural Resources for the Economic Development of the Community*.

Colleague Heads,

Be assured always of the fullest support and involvement of my administration over these six months during which I have the honour to serve as your Chairman.

I pray God's richest blessings on your respective governments and peoples, and on the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

Again, a great, big, Bahamian welcome to each and every one of you!