

Speeches

Keynote Address by the Hon. Billie A. Miller M.P. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs & Foreign Trade at the Opening Ceremony of the 32nd Annual General Assembly of the Caribbean Broadcasting Union, Hotel Habana Libre, Havana

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Bringing the Wider Caribbean Together: Opportunities and Challenges

Hon. President and Members of the National Assembly of the People's Power
President and Secretary-General of the Caribbean Broadcasting Union
President of ICRT
Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Delegates and Industry Partners of the Caribbean Broadcasting Union
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is certainly propitious – indeed, almost providential - that the recent accession of Cuba to full membership of the Caribbean Broadcasting Union, after some years of associate membership, should be followed but one year later by the convening of the 32nd Annual General Assembly of the Union in this great city of Havana.

I am delighted to be participating in this historic gathering.

Not only is Cuba the largest of the many Caribbean Islands, but it has for many years occupied a special and central position in the Caribbean archipelago. In size, it constitutes approximately half of the entire Caribbean island area. In terms of fortitude and resilience, it has demonstrated a capacity to survive, in spite of the many economic and political challenges which have confronted it over the past decades.

The question of the full participation of Cuba in helping to shape the destiny of this hemisphere cannot continue to be ignored. Cuba is de facto and de jure part of the hemisphere and must be treated as such irrespective of ideological and political differences. We confidently expect this great country to take its rightful place in this hemisphere. In CARICOM, we are already building the trade and economic linkages with Cuba as a precursor to that eventuality.

The Caribbean, situated at the heart of the Americas, has always stood at the crossroads of history.

That history has been characterised by plunder, conquest, invasion, genocide, exile, slavery and indenture. Our history began in crisis and has always been subject to external divisive and predatory forces.

And yet the peoples of the Caribbean, flung together in the most inauspicious circumstances, have managed, not only to survive, but also to forge their own unique civilisation and culture, all the richer for the many strands that make up its beautiful human tapestry.

The challenge of survival remains with us. For, confronted by deep structural changes in relations between nations - a phenomenon which we call globalisation - the Caribbean is poised on the fault line between eras. How we respond to these changes will determine whether we remain trapped in

the past, or whether we carve out our own niche in the future.

Let us have no doubt. Globalisation is an irreversible phenomenon. It is the economic and political reality of the early 21st Century. We cannot stop it! We cannot opt out of it!

What we must do is attempt to the best of our collective ability to ensure that the Caribbean becomes a beneficiary of globalisation and trade liberalisation.

This will require unprecedented levels of co-operation and unity and strength of purpose in the Caribbean.

First, we have to be clear about what we mean by the Caribbean. Parochial definitions that limit the Caribbean to linguistic or cultural sub-groups serve no useful purpose in a global age. Entities such as the Commonwealth Caribbean or the English-speaking Caribbean are obsolescent, except as purely descriptive terms.

For the Caribbean to play any meaningful role in the negotiations for a liberalised global economy, nothing less than an inclusive definition of the Caribbean will do.

The Caribbean Community itself – CARICOM - once an exclusive English-speaking bloc, has recognised this reality through the inclusion of Suriname and Haiti.

I suggest that we should go a step further and include Cuba and the Dominican Republic, so encompassing all of the insular Caribbean.

Already in our interface with Europe we include Haiti and the Dominican Republic – in this connection we are known as Cariforum.

I even envisage a Caribbean Economic Community whose membership is the same as that of the Association of Caribbean States, even as we pursue the hemispheric agenda of establishing the Free Trade Area of the Americas – the FTAA.

Indeed, one of the ways forward to a Free Trade Area of the Americas is for regional groupings within the hemisphere to advance their own internal liberalisation of the movement of capital, goods, people and services. It is feasible to see several inter-linked economic sub-groupings within the FTAA - an expanded MERCOSUR, an expanded CARICOM and NAFTA, a Central American grouping and the Andeans.

Within CARICOM, we are forging ahead with the deepening of our integration process through the establishment of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy. We have taken concrete steps not only to permit the free movement of goods, capital and people but services as well. We are also proceeding with the harmonisation of our monetary and fiscal policies. These measures can ultimately be a feature of the all-embracing Caribbean.

I began by saying earlier that we cannot stop trade liberalisation and the technology-driven change that is at the heart of the globalisation process. But neither should we accept it as some impersonal force that is beyond human control and beyond, specifically, the claims of equity and social justice.

There are two attitudes that we can take to globalisation. We can be fatalists, accepting with resignation that impersonal forces will determine our future. Or we can attempt to manage that change to ensure that it benefits our societies. For while the market has shown itself to be a most effective force for innovation and the creation of wealth, the market cannot do it all. An important function of government in this era is precisely to protect the vulnerable sectors and groups within society against the external distortions and shocks inherent in trade liberalisation and globalisation.

The fatalists fall into two categories: those who throw up their hands in horror and cast their eyes fondly backward, and those who enthusiastically welcome without discrimination whatever that change may bring. The former will inherit failed societies as they vainly try to stop the unstoppable. The latter will reap the whirlwind, as they, like our ancient ancestors in the grip of superstition, interpret impersonal forces as magical expressions of gods to be placated.

The Caribbean is composed mainly of small states whose narrowly constrained economic bases mean that they must constantly travel along a knife-edge of development. The challenges are great. Whether or not we succeed or fail depends generally on how we respond to a wide variety of economic, social, environmental and cultural shocks, while at the same time exploiting the opportunities that come our way.

For our Caribbean to successfully operate in a globalised economy, driven by the principles of the World Trade Organisation, it has to proceed along a clearly defined path.

Firstly, we must accelerate and deepen trade liberalisation arrangements, especially in the area of services. It is essential for the Caribbean to dismantle its own internal barriers to trade faster and deeper than the rest of the world, if it is to benefit from the process of global liberalisation, also known as WTO plus.

Secondly, we must continue to participate in the FTAA process, on terms that take full cognisance of the pace at which we are capable of moving. What I am suggesting is the process of open regionalism.

At the global level, where the liberalisation process is being directed by the WTO, I believe that the Caribbean should act in concert to ensure that obligations which it has to assume are not onerous or inimical to its development interests.

There must be a conceptual and practical acceptance both within the FTAA process as well as within the WTO that small economies, because of their acute vulnerability, require special and differentiated treatment. This is necessary in order to survive in the new global economy. In this regard, the Prime Minister of Barbados, The Rt. Honourable Owen Arthur, has worked tirelessly spearheading the Task Force that has brought international attention to the issue of the vulnerability of Small States, their volatility to external shocks, and the need for the international community to embrace a new development paradigm in responding to the challenge of successfully integrating them into the new global economy. The fact that this issue now features on the Agenda of the World Bank is a matter of great satisfaction to all the affected countries.

Special and differentiated treatment could take the form of longer phase-in periods; more derogations from agreed liberalisation where necessary; access to social cohesion funds; special arrangements to allow small states affordable access to the very costly dispute settlement mechanisms of the WTO; and technical assistance for capacity building and institutional reform.

The Caribbean has usually been at its most cohesive when faced with severe crises. Globalisation and trade liberalisation do constitute one of our greatest challenges.

But I am confident that the Caribbean can unite for the purpose of ensuring that our region benefits from a global economy that takes account of different levels of development.

Our region is rich in the resource that is fuelling the global economy - human ingenuity. But we can achieve even greater levels of efficiency and greater synergies if we pool our resources. We have an enormous unrealised potential for technological innovation in many areas - from solar power to sugar cane technology, to tourism. What we need is a greater institutionalised exchange of information and scholarship among our universities. We must bring our most creative minds together in two or three centres of research, think tanks that could serve as centres of excellence,

cutting across the barriers of language and culture.

We must preserve for future generations our intellectual property by branding appropriate goods and services as uniquely Caribbean, fully protected by international copyright law. "Made in the Caribbean" should become a sign of high quality worldwide.

We have world-renowned cultural achievements in every area of artistic endeavour. But it is necessary to protect the Caribbean in an era of globalisation as much from cultural as from economic marginalisation. Creating a unified economic space in the Caribbean will give our artistes greater scope for making a living from their products and services. This in itself will help us to withstand the powerful forces of cultural penetration as well as provide a platform for the export of such cultural services and products.

The Caribbean media have an important role to play in this context. You are the gatekeepers, the opinion formers with a great responsibility to educate and inform. You must adopt a Caribbean perspective in your coverage of the news. You must facilitate and encourage the development of local cultural products as part of your entertainment mission. I know that this is costly. For it is cheaper and easier to rely on mass-packaged imported entertainment. And it is even easier to justify this on the grounds that it is what the people want. But by taking such a course, you abandon your responsibility to the public in favour of your responsibility to your sponsors, rather than choose to walk the hard line between the two.

There is a vigorous debate, even in the developed countries, between the defenders of cultural identities and the partisans of an intransigent application of market criteria to all forms of production. Canada and France, for example, have taken some interesting positions on the need to protect local cultural content in the media, in the face of globalisation and trade liberalisation.

The Caribbean must launch its own regional satellite network to tell its story to the rest of the world. The technology is accessible and affordable. Partnership between the regional governments and the regional private sector can make it happen and quickly and bilingually. This will help to bring the region closer together – including the diaspora which will then become notional.

We should not retreat from the responsibility of preserving for our children and their children the marvellous heritage that is our Caribbean Sea, by collectively managing its resources and its uses in an ecologically sound way to the benefit of our peoples. Governments in the Caribbean and their peoples have become increasingly conscious of the urgent need to protect, manage and preserve this shared patrimony. There is ample scope within the Law of the Sea for having the Caribbean Sea recognised internationally as a special area for sustainable development. Barbados has therefore launched a major initiative at the United Nations aimed at focussing international attention on the fragility and vulnerability of that resource, and the need for cooperation to safeguard it against environmental degradation and over-exploitation. In order to create an effective regime for its careful management, we have requested of the international community that the Caribbean Sea be designated a Special Area in the context of Sustainable Development. The concept is still in its embryonic stage and we are in the process of assembling a team of experts to develop it further. We hope that we can persuade the United States to participate fully in these efforts. We believe that through creative diplomacy it is perfectly possible to devise a Special Area regime in this unique context which will meet both the Caribbean's sustainable development objectives as well as the security concerns of other countries.

We must also define and determine appropriate collective arrangements for maintaining the security of the Caribbean, not in the archaic cold war military sense, but against the many threats stemming from such phenomena as natural disasters; environmental degradation, including global warming; the HIV/AIDS pandemic; drug trafficking and abuse; increasing levels of crime and corruption and the transportation of toxic waste. All of these factors are both socially and economically disruptive. They are wrecking our societies and undermining our efforts at development.

Our economic efforts at building a secure, stable and successful neighbourhood must be underpinned by a comprehensive partnership for hemispheric security. That partnership must be based on a clear recognition of the growing interdependence of hemispheric states, and the need for coordinated regional strategies to deal effectively with the new non-trade and non-military threats to their security. For the smallest and most vulnerable states, we have defined security as multidimensional in scope, involving state and non-state actors, and political, economic, social and natural components.

We believe there is much scope for improvement in this area thus moving us away from the bilateral approach to a region-wide multilateral response. We in our small space in the Caribbean are looking forward to working within this much wider context to achieve our objective.

Our agenda must also embrace the continual improvement of our forms of governance to ensure greater popular participation by those who are governed and greater accountability of those who govern.

Democracy and human rights are not and should not be instruments of any state's foreign policy. They are not means to an end, but an end in themselves.

It is imperative that we break out of the mindset whereby the North is the keeper of the sacred tablets of democracy while the South merely aspires to reach the promised land. Very recent history has put paid to that lie. Democracy is not a final state at which one arrives. Like development, democracy is a dynamic, never-ending process that needs to be strengthened everywhere.

The Caribbean is rich in its indigenous democratic heritage and experiments in governance, however imperfect they may be. Collectively we can share our experiences and pool our knowledge to enhance the participation in political life and the enjoyment of fundamental human rights of all our peoples. I believe that one day the Caribbean will set standards of excellence in democratic governance as in other areas.

The challenges facing a multicultural, multilingual Caribbean are daunting at the best of times. But in this era of rapid and profound change, we have no choice but to unite to carve out our place in the new world that is being fashioned. The alternative is too bleak to contemplate.

The opportunities are abundant and exciting. The Caribbean is a dynamic region, and it should be our full intention to create a supportive framework in which all can progress together and in which the sharing of ideas and experiences can foster change and inclusion.

All we need is the vision and the political will to do so. We are not expected to complete this great task which lies before us but neither are we at liberty to abstain from it.

I thank you.