

# Speeches

## **Feature Address by Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Hon. Billie A. Miller, at the Opening Ceremony of the Annual Assembly and Conference of Rotary District 7030**

**Thursday 3rd May 2001 at 5.30pm  
Sherbourne Conference Centre.**

Master of Ceremonies  
Officials of Rotary  
Visiting Delegations  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Welcome to Barbados in the Year of the Volunteers. Your Conference has come to us at a timely moment. You are here at a time when the Caribbean is placing an increasing focus on the role of civil society in confronting the development challenges of our region. It is important that as you embark upon your agenda you should do so in the context of the social, political and economic realities of our times.

The advent of rapid globalisation in which we are all enmeshed has brought into high profile the role of the State. The Government of Barbados does not subscribe to the view espoused in some circles that the State has outlived its usefulness and should now take a back seat. For us it is clear that the role of the State is in the process of being reassessed and redefined to encompass a variety of power sharing mechanisms with the differing elements of Civil Society.

If the global agenda is to be effectively addressed in the Caribbean, a partnership with Civil Society is not an option, it is a necessity. And all the more so for small states. In short we must recognise what United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan refers to as the "NGO revolution - the new global people-power". This phenomenon is arguably one of the happier consequences of globalisation, providing it with a human face.

Most of the challenges we face in this region involve global issues. Civil Society organisations have already given new meaning to the idea of an international community. The desire to participate in the management of a changing world, and the need to engage where Governments are unable or unwilling to act, has driven you to action.

Since the Earth Summit in 1992, Civil Society has made its mark on a series of world conferences on such vital issues as the environment, human rights, population, poverty and the advancement of women. The Caribbean has been in the vanguard of this movement. As far back as 1993, The West Indian Commission in its publication Time For Action, recommended that "new modalities of governance and sustainability of the integration process required a strong and supportive civil society".

Subsequently the Heads of Government, at their Conference in 1997 in Antigua and Barbuda, adopted the Charter of Civil Society and "reaffirmed their commitment in the Consensus of Chaguaramas to create a regional movement in a truly participatory environment, based on genuine consultation in the process of governance".

Across the broad spectrum of human endeavours and behaviours addressed in the Charter are: respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms; human dignity; religious and cultural diversity; access to education and training; good governance; participation in the economy; women's rights

and children's rights.

As Caricom engages in the task of developing a Single Market and Economy, a role for civil society is an indispensable reality. The fact that such a role has been formalized and institutionalised in the form of a Charter reflects a genuine attempt by Caribbean governments to adopt a more inclusive approach to governance.

The importance of the Charter of Civil Society to the integrity of the integration movement has been eloquently stated by the West Indian Commission; "Caricom needs normative moorings; we have found widespread yearnings for giving the Community a qualitative character - values beyond the routine of integration arrangements themselves, against which they can be judged and to which they can be made to conform. The Charter can become the soul of the Community, which needs a soul if it is to command the loyalty of the people of Caricom".

The central logic for this involvement of civil society springs from the recognition by Caribbean Governments that the fount of all knowledge, wisdom and understanding does not reside in any one section of society. The best decisions are usually those that are made through wide consultation with a range of participants pooling their varied expertise, experiences and views.

The Charter therefore, by its involvement of a wide variety of social actors in the integration movement of the region, will accelerate our development and add authenticity, legitimacy and sustainability to the process. It will ensure for example that we construct a Single Market and Economy which is not merely an combination of legalistic protocols comprising rules, regulations and laws owned and imposed by a political directorate. As Prime Minister Arthur has stated, the implementation of the Single Market and Economy will require a shared perspective that can give rise to a consensus out of which can evolve a Plan of Action. The Single Market and Economy must be a lived experienced for the ordinary man and woman of the Caribbean.

In Article XXII of the Charter of Civil Society, for example: "The States undertake to establish within their respective States a framework for genuine consultation among social partners in order to reach common understanding on and support for the objectives, content and implementation of national economic and social programmes and their respective roles and responsibilities in good governance."

Barbados has started the process of institutionalising this through the implementation of a tripartite arrangement, consisting of Government, labour unions and the private sector. It is called the Social Partnership. We are seeing the need to broaden the range of actors presently included and the scope of issues on the table for discussion.

It is against this background that I view the involvement of the Rotary Club in the social and cultural life of the region. Volunteer organisations can easily mobilise financial and human resources to meet social needs in a way which Governments, because of their structure, are not organised to do. They are also able to promote social cohesion by developing a value consensus among their membership. In addition they provide a core of expertise in a range of fields upon which Governments can readily draw for advice.

There are other benefits as well. Consultation with civil society fosters an appreciation of all dimensions of the issues being debated. Decision-makers can use the opportunity to "feel the temperature" among the main stakeholders and if necessary reassess their positions. And, very importantly for a politician, members of civil society can help facilitate implementation by providing legitimacy and selling the decision to their constituencies.

Barbados has three Rotary Clubs, all involved in charitable work. At the community level Rotary has raised \$500,000 in funds for the renovation of the pediatric unit at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. It also coordinated with BICO Limited to host a General Knowledge Competition. It has raised funds

for such causes as play parks at Batts Rock and Folkstone Park, the Maurice Byre Polyclinic and repairs of senior citizens' homes. A Youth Exchange Programme will soon be implemented. All of this speaks to an organisation imbued with a deep sense of responsibility for national development.

Rotary is an outstanding example of voluntarism in an era when the emphasis is all too often on profit-making and personal aggrandisement. In this connection, since 2001 has been designated by the United Nations as the Year of the Volunteer, this Conference is all the more opportune. Government will continue its policy of facilitating the work of local volunteer organisations through the process of dialogue and the appropriate provision of subventions and technical resources. In Barbados we have delegated to established NGOs certain functions. The Salvation Army runs the Home for Flood and Fire Victims. The Soroptomists runs the Home for Battered Women.

The Caribbean Community will shortly be convening the Forward Together Conference in November 2001. To prepare for this three-day event, Governments will be holding a series of national consultations in their individual territories.

The intention is to even further strengthen the involvement of Civil Society in the Caribbean Community. A highlight of this conference will be the participation of Heads of Governments in the dialogue related to the outcome from the plenary and working groups.

The aims of the conference include discussing the role of Civil Society in the development of the region; identifying new approaches to collaboration and consultation between civil society and Government, especially in the pursuit of the Caribbean region; and strengthening the scope for dialogue and collaboration among various strands of non-state actors in promoting regional development.

Rotary has a legitimate part to play in such a Conference, which will bring together a wide collection of representatives from the private sector, labour, non-governmental organisations, youth, gender, religious, media, academic and other community groups.

I want to use this opportunity to urge Rotary, along with all Civil Society groups in Barbados, to participate fully in the National Consultations which will precede the regional conference. Issues to be discussed at the National Consultations will be informed by a broad vision of Caribbean development and the role of Civil Society in shaping the development strategies. The task is to arrive at some concrete options on the type of economic, social and political structures that could make the Caribbean region as highly competitive and viable as possible in the new global arena.

I also want to draw to your attention the four sub-themes recommended for the plenary sessions and for the Working Groups. They are: -

- (1) Organising the proposed Caribbean Single Market and Economy to maximize the development potential nationally and regionally to benefit Caribbean people.
- (2) Integrating Youth and Women fully into the development agenda.
- (3) Justice, Governance and Human Rights:
  - Ø Are there useful models?
  - Ø What has to be changed, Why and How?
- (4) Moving beyond the rhetoric of human and financial capital investments to improve the Region's International Competitiveness.

I believe that these themes all reflect issues that are of concern to your organisation. For example the Single Market and Economy has the potential to facilitate the work of organisations such as Rotary which have a regional structure. As I understand it District 7030 stretches from Martinique and Guadeloupe in the North to Suriname in the South and consists of 46 clubs. You would therefore have a vested interest in ensuring that any such regional integration mechanism is organised in such ways as to take into account your special interests and concerns.

Sub-theme two, which speaks to the special role of youth and women in the development agenda, is also clearly an issue in which Rotary would want to take special note. I understand that both the Rotary and the Rotaracts Clubs in Guyana made important contributions to the hosting of the first Model Caricom Youth Summit in Guyana in December 2000. That summit recognised that there is a need for increased opportunities for youth participation in the decision-making organs of the Caribbean Community.

There is no need for us in the Region to reinvent the wheel. There are already various examples of the inclusion of consultative mechanisms of civil society in integration processes. Probably the most well known example is that of the European Union which requires Community Council recommendations to be forwarded to the Economic and Social Committee for an opinion before adoption by the Council of Ministers. Other integration processes in the Latin America region have put in place, or are putting in place, measures that will enhance dialogue with the private sector and Labour.

With respect to the Institutions of the Caribbean Community, the general practice however is to invite representatives of the private sector from time to time to participate in discussion on certain items on the agenda of the various Community Organs or Bodies.

The regular meetings of the Conference of Heads of Governments have provided a useful but limited opportunity for Labour, the private sector and the NGOs to have an audience with the highest Organ of the Community.

There is an urgent need to fill this breach. The Sixth Meeting of the Community Council of Ministers last year considered a number of modalities for further institutionalising the participation of civil society in CARICOM. These included inviting NGOs, Labour and the Private Sector to more of the Community's sectoral meetings; establishing consultative fora for meetings among representatives of civil society with a small "Bureau" of Trade Ministers and Community Ministers of Heads; and designing a communications network to facilitate regular dialogue between the Secretariat, the Regional Negotiating Machinery and Civil Society on a variety of issues.

I strongly urge that you allocate time during your deliberations over the next few days to develop and fine tune means by which we can translate such lofty ideals into concrete and practical measures and in the process reaffirm the relevance of organisations such as Rotary to the regional integration movement.

It is against this background that again I welcome all of the delegates to Barbados and wish you every success in your discussions.