

TWO CIVILISATIONS MEET: A WELCOME

by

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and

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**Dr. The Honourable Ralph E. Gonsalves
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Today we commence our three-day “Conference on the Caribbean: A 2020 Vision” with government-to-government conversations, government-to-people dialogues, and people-to-people engagements. These encounters are more than merely a collective event; they constitute the commencement of a process to build ever more securely a mature partnership between two civilisations — one American, the other Caribbean. An admixture of existential bonds, realities, dreams and self-interest conspire to predispose and induce a common pursuit of an ennobling good neighbourliness rooted in dignity, respect, and a better humanity. Geography, history, and the sober realities of the contemporary world have brought us together; no man, indeed no woman, ought to put us asunder. That should be our simple, but firm, resolve. The cynics may say that we are unequally yoked but our ties are so manifest, and enduring, that in this metaphoric marriage of true minds we ought to look on tempests and never be shaken. That has long been the dream in “Our America” of Thomas Jefferson, Toussaint L’Ouverture, José Marti, Simon Bolivar, Norman Washington Manley, Errol Barrow, Eric Williams, and Robert Milton Cato. We can, together now, turn that dream into reality.

Ten years ago, the Governments of the member-states of CARICOM and the United States of America last met collectively in Bridgetown, Barbados. A Declaration with solemn commitments was agreed upon. It would be a hyperbole to assert that this Declaration was ever given practical life and meaning. We ought never to make such an error of negligence, inadvertence or omission again in our implementation of agreed tasks.

Since 1997 much has changed: Modern globalisation has gathered pace relentlessly, not always with efficacious results for the marginalised; trade liberalisation has placed the farmers on the hillsides, valleys and plains of the Caribbean on the front-line of economic dislocations particularly in the banana and sugar industries; the revolution in information technology has transformed daily life and production but the hinterlands of poverty are still playing catch-up; international terrorism, drug-trafficking, and transnational crime have rightly become centre-stage preoccupations of all civilised regimes; and the rock-solid social capital of tried and tested values of yesteryear is becoming increasingly frayed under the hedonistic assaults of a profit-mongering wing of the popular entertainment – information complex which places the almighty dollar and the sensational gutter before uplifting humane values.

Two responses are possible for CARICOM in the face of these awesome challenges. First, roll over, do nothing and play dead; this is unacceptable; or secondly, seek creatively to construct a modern competitive post-colonial economy within the framework of a further ennoblement of our Caribbean civilisation.

This second, creative response involves, among other things, the deepening of regional integration through the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) and beyond, and enhancing our region’s capacity to address more capably our external environment within the interest of our own humanisation. This demands in part, the practical elaboration of mature relationships, with nations and civilisations in our hemisphere, including and especially the United States of America. Thus, this most remarkable engagement this week between the American and Caribbean civilisations, in which the respective state systems have rightly assumed a pivotal, though not exclusive role.

We have come, I reiterate, to commence a process to fashion ever more securely a mature partnership between CARICOM member-states and the USA.

This requires, too, the crafting of a new and better language with which to articulate, in dignity and real meaning, the hopes, aspirations, and sensibilities of our enduring bonds.

We do not bring a laundry list of demands; and we come not in supplication but in genuine friendship, which historically over the ages has been fertilised and watered by our unbreakable ties. To be sure, there have been hiccups, dissonance and disagreements in our relationship but never a hint of rupture as the rapture of an elemental friendship endures. As our Caribbean region more and more finds its maturing voice, with a new generation of post-colonial peoples and leaders, we are certain that it is possible, together, for the USA and CARICOM to glimpse a glorious dawn before sunrise and secure real achievements before any proverbial sundown.

The issues before us are weighty and pregnant with a profound meaning for the lives of all our peoples in this hemisphere: Economic growth and sustainable development; human development and poverty reduction; fair trade; functional cooperation in tourism, energy, financial services, HIV/AIDS, disaster preparedness, climate change, information technology, managed migration, and cultural Industries; support for regional integration; governance and democracy; and security for all.

We feel sure that this Conference will not be written off by history as a “talk-shop”, a “photo opportunity” or some such derisive description. We are confident that uplifting practical outcomes will emerge. But we must all be committed to this quest for real accomplishments. We are embarked on a great cause of building an enduring, mature relationship between friends and neighbours. And great causes are not won by doubtful men and women.

On behalf of the Caribbean Community I welcome you, most joyously to this Caribbean Conference: A 20/20 Vision. Weeping may endure for a night but it is joy which cometh in the morning!

Thank you.