

Dr the Right Honourable Keith C Mitchell  
Opening Ceremony  
38th Regular Meeting  
Conference of Heads of Government of CARICOM  
Grenada Trade Center, 4 July 2017

**Salutations...**

Welcome:

I am pleased to welcome colleague Heads of Government, Heads of Delegations, and all delegates to beautiful "Pure Grenada."

It is also my distinct pleasure to welcome to their first Regular Meeting of the Conference, the distinguished President of the Republic of Haiti, Jovenel Moïse, and the distinguished Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, Dr Hubert Minnis.

A Most Challenging Time:

Colleagues, our Community has, in its collective history, faced some very challenging periods over the years. But, my question to us as Heads is, **"are** we sufficiently demonstrating that we are actively engaged in resolving the challenges we face as a region—*collectively*?

CSME and Integration:

Ladies and Gentlemen, fully twenty eight years ago at the 10<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Conference here at Grand Anse, our Community agreed to deepen the economic

integration arrangement from a common market into a CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME).

We must, therefore, seize the opportunity of this 38<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Conference, to summon both the spirit of the Grand Anse Declaration and the collective experiences of the last twenty eight years, in recalibrating our approach to the environment in which CARICOM must continue to pursue the ideals of the CSME.

Evidently, our Region has made tremendous strides in a number of critical areas, of which we ought rightfully, to be proud. We have managed to craft a development space, made more predictable and certain by the impositions of the Caribbean Court of Justice, in order to deploy strategies for the economic and social advancement of our Community.

We have also strengthened our governance arrangements, and agreed on improved modalities for public consultations.

#### Call for Greater People Participation Modalities:

Still, with the heightened level of activity at the regional level, our integration process continues to be leveled with criticism in several important quarters of the Community, for being somewhat removed, if not completely aloof, from the more tangible aspirations of our Caribbean People.

Having spent 32 years and counting, in the political arena, I have become convinced that perhaps the most difficult task is to develop **“inclusive”** mechanisms that close the **“political distance”** between our integration arrangements and the demands of our people, at all levels of our societies—but especially with our young people.

Here in Grenada, upon assuming Office in 2013, we faced diverse stakeholder interests and no parliamentary opposition, so we took the decision to institutionalize a Committee of Social Partners, and have since harvested tremendous benefits from this partnership.

We need to find similar modalities that work on a regional level.

### Unfair Trading Practices:

Closing the political distance with our regional constituents also means that we must deliver on the proposition committed to by our forbearers, as far back as Dickenson Bay in 1965, and I Quote:

**“AWARE that the broadening of domestic markets through the elimination of barriers to trade between the territories is a prerequisite to such development;**

**CONVINCED that such elimination of barriers to trade can best be achieved by the immediate establishment of a Free Trade Economic Community for all the countries who so **desire;**”** [End quote].

I am sure we would all understand how, fifty two years on, our Regional constituents are becoming skeptical, when it is demonstrated time and time again that - after satisfying all of the Treaty provisions - they cannot export to their own neighboring countries, duck meat from Suriname or honey from Grenada. The same honey is exported to the United States and Europe, and has won several international awards for quality.

These actions diminish the hard earned gains of our integration efforts—so much so, that it is widely chronicled about CARICOM that **“intra-regional Trade is obstructed by non-tariff barriers, which all affect our global **competitiveness.**”**

Colleagues, deepening partnerships through the CSME requires that we urgently dispel with the **“knee jerk”** nationalistic response in exchange for higher Community ideals in some key areas.

### Transport and Connectivity:

Colleagues, transportation is the life blood of our integration process.

Weak domestic and intra-regional air travel, added to low service competition and high travel costs—all culminate in the reality that Caribbean countries connect more easily to destinations outside of the Region than to destinations within Member States.

Colleagues, an integral aspect of our approach in addressing the issue of air connectivity must include reducing the cost of air travel to rejuvenate intra-regional travel.

It would represent a significant installment to the "regional integration account" if Heads would collectively agree to reduce airline ticket taxes, as well as other fees which attach to the cost of intra-regional air travel.

Further, I have long held the belief that political presence on the board of airlines, such as LIAT, is not helpful to its proper management and efficiency.

LIAT's sustainability would have benefited if it was run more as a private sector company. Governments could then subsidise flights to given destinations or routes that are in the best interest of their respective countries.

Colleagues, how could LIAT thrive when, for example, a few months ago, literally overnight, LIAT canceled one of its most lucrative routes to and from Grenada, without any consultation with the citizens or leadership of Grenada?

And it was all based on politics. Colleagues, we have to do better as a Region.

#### Connectivity and ICT:

Colleagues, like transportation, ICT is a critical component of our economies and plays an essential role in connecting our societies, and in ensuring our ability to engage the world on equal terms.

Among the several important items on the Conference Agenda will be a report for adoption on the "**Work Plan**" for the Single CARICOM ICT Space. Placed in proper context, the Single ICT Space will be critical to our attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, and for the **Region's** Digital Agenda 2025.

The Single ICT Space must be used as the axle on which we hitch other indispensable initiatives, including those related to the cyber security action plan, recently approved by the Council for National Security and Law Enforcement.

Our children's future and their ability to compete on the global level hang in the balance.

#### Statistics:

Colleagues, the need to produce timely, quality statistics remains critical. At the Thirty-Seventh Regular Meeting of the Conference, we endorsed the "Action Plan for Statistics in the Caribbean."

Our decision-making and the pursuit of policy at the national and regional levels cannot be ad-hoc; it must be evidence-based. Colleague Heads will soon be appraised of progress towards the formulation of the Regional Strategy for Statistics Development.

During my Chairmanship, and echoing some of my advancements as a Board member of Paris21, our Community should aim at several key achievements, including: (1) a comprehensive quantitative assessment of trade performance under the CSME, and (2) the strengthening of the **"Statistics Division"** of the CARICOM Secretariat, to better equip our Region to carry out the heavy lifting required in respect of evolving demands.

#### Small States and Small States Financing:

Colleagues, the 2015 Paris Agreement (COP21), and the Sustainable Development Goals have shifted attention to the uniqueness of Small States; thereby presenting us with the possibility of new and more diverse development prospects.

A recent World Bank study values the Caribbean Blue Economy at US\$409 billion, with many maritime spaces significantly greater than our land masses.

As such, our Chairmanship of the Small States Forum must be used to harness these development possibilities by addressing the issues of Small States' access to finance and technology, and advancement of the **"Blue Economy."**

Colleagues, the increase from USD \$50 billion to USD\$75 billion in International Donor Financing is also a major opportunity for Small States that are eligible for this financing.

Additionally, many of us continue to be concerned that, compared to large Developed economies, the Caribbean is paying 200-500 percent more for electricity.

As responsible governments, we need to use the funding opportunities increasingly available to Small States to build energy resilience, making renewable energy, geothermal energy, solar energy and wind energy the leading sources, by 2030.

Colleagues, these are precisely the kinds of issues that we must address, if we are to demonstrate seriousness to our regional constituents.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to make a few quick points before I conclude, which signal our current and future tasks, as a Community.

We must be acutely aware that our constituents around the Region, especially our youth, pay close attention to our collective conduct on issues that matter a great deal to them.

We, ourselves, do a lot to undermine the very construct of CARICOM and regional integration when we yield to the urge to go off on solo excursions, even after we reach common positions.

Every instance of this deepens the cynicism about our ability as CARICOM Heads to remain consistent; to stand in solidarity on issues; and to follow through on consensus decisions.

#### Cricket:

West Indies cricket is one such issue.

Cricket, with all its challenges, remains a unique West Indian enterprise, worthy of support and promotion.

The legacies that have been created by our players on the field, and the voice they have given throughout generations, to expressions of West Indian identity, have been well-documented and chronicled through the years.

Gary Sobers, Learie Constantine, Frank Worrell, Michael Holding and Vivian Richards were not just great cricketers. They helped to forge a West Indian identity globally, that impacted all facets of Caribbean life.

So, when we get together to discuss the current challenges of the regional game, it is not merely a case of politicians dabbling in some useless pastime.

It is, therefore, greatly disheartening to me, and several other colleague Heads, that after CARICOM had taken common positions to assist in addressing the crisis of West Indies cricket, certain Member Governments thereafter publicly adopted different positions.

Colleagues, there is an urgent need for us to get back on course, because the current state of affairs of cricket should be a complete embarrassment to all of us who call ourselves West Indians.

The failure of the team to qualify for the recent Champions Trophy in England, and the possibility that it now has to play a qualifying tournament among the lowest to see if it can make the next World Cup, is the latest symptom of the crisis.

The West Indies Cricket Board, as presently constituted, has long ceased to pay attention to the alarm bells.

The questions must then be asked—*are we going to fiddle in disunity, while West Indies cricket burns?*

Do we stand by and do nothing, as the current system almost renders the regional game irrelevant?

Colleagues, will we continue, as Heads, to agree on positions behind closed doors, only to return home and in the glare of the public, push a different agenda?

We can do better. We must do better.

The Venezuela Crisis:

Colleagues, while we are on the issue of CARICOM unity and CARICOM solidarity, we must also find the resolve to commit to a unified position on the current political challenge in neighboring Venezuela.

We cannot ignore what is going on in a country with which all of our Member States have had strong historic ties; and one with which countries such as Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago share maritime borders.

These realities, combined with our international record of standing up for political order, democracy and respect for human rights, ought to inspire us to arrive at a clear stance on this current crisis in Venezuela.

Of course, in doing so, we must be cognizant of the broad principles of non-interference, the support for the rule of law and order, constitutionality, and the respect for human rights.

We appreciate that there is a duly elected government in place in Venezuela, and that many of the internal struggles are manifestations of a struggle for political power.

As proud, independent nations, with a shared history of anti-colonial struggle, we approach these issues, rightfully so, with a particular mindset. Indeed, when certain international advocates whisper aloud about unconstitutional regime change, we must give pause; but pause must not result in paralysis. Our inaction must not be the consequence of our suspicion.

Colleagues, as a Region and as neighbors, we need to be concerned about anomalies and excesses; and about extremism from all sides.

We must stand united to condemn violence - from whichever quarter it comes.

We must, therefore, not retreat from using our close ties to nudge all parties to a position of “dialogue” that will be in the best interest of the People of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Conclusion:

In concluding, Colleague Heads, ladies and gentlemen, the challenges are real, but regional cooperation and collective action continue to be the best strategy for development.

We must be ready to stand in the gap for each other, joined as we are by our common challenges and aspirations.

We must be prepared to manage our national interests in a manner which maintains the unity and cohesion of our Community, for the advancement of our peoples.

It has been a gratifying journey for me to have seen our gains over the years, and it will be even more so for me to see us realize a few more before I leave this arena, given that this is likely to be the last time I host a Heads of Government Conference.

I am indeed, in the departure lounge of my career, and other Heads may be, as **well...**

Colleagues, I look forward to our productive deliberations here in beautiful Grenada.

I thank you.