

GOOD GOVERNANCE, REGIONAL  
INTEGRATION AND FOREIGN POLICY:  
A CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE

by

**Dr. The Honourable Ralph E. Gonsalves**  
**Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines**



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**{Formal Greetings!}**

First, permit me to thank the Caribbean Guyana Institute for Democracy (CGID) for awarding me the prestigious “Democracy Prize” for 2005. I feel humbled. In truth, it belongs not so much to me but to the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Caribbean who have moulded me and who remain steadfast to the best universal practices of democracy. I pledge, yet again, to be a faithful servant of the precepts, ideals, and bedrock principles of democracy and their day-to-day manifestations in governance. From my prime ministerial spot, my quest, in part, is to deepen and extend democracy in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the region. I know that my two colleagues Prime Ministers, Patrick Manning of Trinidad and Tobago and Owen Arthur of Barbados, who have been recipients, too, of this treasured Prize, share both my democratic commitment and quest.

I am over-joyed that my very dear friend, and, I believe, political soul-mate, Baroness Valerie Amos is here with me this evening at this ceremony. Baroness Amos is a most remarkable human being who is at once a child of our Caribbean civilisation, and of one of its maternal well-springs, the British civilisation. Her rise to the high office of Leader of the House of Lords in the United Kingdom Parliament is a kind of “colonisation in reverse” to use Louise Bennett’s telling phrase from one of her more expressive poems. A woman, and a black woman at that, leading the Lords and Ladies in the stuffy, old “Lords” is deserving of a vintage calypso by the Mighty Sparrow as a twin to his humourous and irreverent “Philip My Dear”. I have a suggested title for it: “Valerie, I Love you”.

This evening I want to hold a brief conversation with you on three inter-connected issues: Good Governance, Regional Integration, and Foreign Policy, from a Caribbean perspective.

In the 2005 Elections Manifesto of the United Labour Party (ULP), which I have the honour to lead, states, among other things, as follows:

“The ULP’s “good governance” policy revolves around four central pillars:

**“(i) Deepening political democracy, enhancing openness and transparency, strengthening individual rights and freedoms, encouraging civic participation in governance, upholding the law and the constitution, and delivering justice;**

**“(ii) Modernising and reforming government so as to better and more efficiently deliver all the services provided by government;**

**“(iii) Moving resolutely against corruption in government; and**

**“(iv) Being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime.”**

**Good governance, therefore, centres around well-known catchwords, pregnant with real meaning, namely: Democracy, representative government, separation of powers, freedom, individual rights, law and order, security, integrity, public morality, political hygiene, responsibility and responsiveness, the rule of law, equality before the law, accountability, public participation, free choice, transparency and openness, effectiveness of public management, and political virtue.**

**Several salient issues arise in any reflective consideration of good governance, including:**

**First, various elements in the good governance enterprise collide. Thus, a careful balance must be effected between them; the contradictory features require reconciliation or resolution in practice for the enterprise to survive and thrive.**

**Secondly, good governance is not an abstraction. It is a lived and living experience; it is a work in progress with a minimum core of tested values and international best practices.**

**Thirdly, no two systems of good governance are identical, even where the formal constitutional apparatuses are more or less so, since historical circumstances or traditions, the contemporary milieu, and a veritable parallelogram of forces, including the very democratic or libertarian temper of the people themselves, exercise enormous influence beyond the formal rules of the political system.**

**Fourthly, essentially, good governance is about doing the right things and doing them right to the best of the abilities of the governed and those who govern.**

**Fifthly, the content of good governance depends centrally on the political virtuousness of the people and their leaders.**

The absence of a sufficiency of virtue, and its consequences, in the political system have an intimate connection with governance but, surprisingly, this question has received scant emphasis. Accordingly, I shall focus on it.

The Mexican Nobel Prize Winner in Literature, Octavio Paz, drew my attention to this issue of “virtue” generally, and its derivative, “political virtue”, in his fascinating book Itinerary: An Intellectual Journey in the following terms:

*“The meaning of this word virtue has been argued over many times —, but whatever meaning one may choose, the word always denotes self-mastery. When virtue weakens and we are dominated by passions — nearly always by inferior ones like envy, vanity, avarice, lust, laziness — the republics die out. When we can no longer control our appetites we are ready to be dominated by someone else. The market has undermined all the ancient beliefs — many of them, it is true, were nefarious — but only one passion has replaced them, that of buying things and consuming this or that object. Our hedonism is not a philosophy of pleasure but an abdication of free will and would have scandalised equally both the gentle Epicurus and the frantic Marquis de Sade. Hedonism is not the sin of modern democracies; it is*

*the sin of conformism, the vulgarity of its passions the uniformity of tastes, ideas and convictions.”*

Many political leaders and commentators the world over implicitly — some, explicitly — have acknowledged the insufficiency of virtue, that is to say, the lack of a sufficiency of individual and collective self-mastery in their political systems, in their quest to reform or uplift the nature of politics. In Britain, Tony Blair has sought to paint his politics with a broad moral brush and to emphasise the cherished values of the so-called common-man”. His heir-apparent, Gordon Brown, has recently unveiled a campaign to proclaim, and reclaim, core “British values” for the “political left”, for the social democratic enterprise. The new leader of the British Tony party, David Cameron, meanwhile seeks to out-manoeuvre Brown on the values front. In the U.S.A., the strategists of both the Republican and Democratic parties pigeon hole this issue in terms of “middle-class values” or even more narrowly by the “religious right” as “family values”. In the Caribbean, a number of leaders, including me, finds sustenance from the tried and tested values of our Caribbean civilisation in a quest to reform, for the better, our political systems. Similarly, Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, respectively, search for a renewal of values grounded in self-mastery, including revolutionary commitment and self-sacrifice, in the construction of socialist democracy in

**Cuba and the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. In whichever country of the world, this matter of political virtuousness arises as vital.**

**It is self-evident to me that a viable democracy, or indeed improved or reformed governance, cannot thrive in a milieu where the lowest common denominator of the people's instincts or their inferior passions drive public discourse or public policy. Those who are untutored or unlearned in a core of tried and tested values grounded in the mores or ennobling ethos, spirit and being of the civilisation of the particular country or region, cannot be relied upon to lead or even delineate, the contours, and specifics, of public discourse or issues touching and concerning good governance. This is not a summons to elitism; indeed, it is a blast against the elitism of ignorance and base motivations; and it is a beckoning to restore or put into politics the best of the people's instincts, dispositions, beliefs, values, ideas, and culture. Coarseness in public discourse, avarice and greed in daily living, laziness, and learned helplessness cannot be the building blocks for good governance. The temple will collapse!**

**A large section of the much-touted "free media" of the modern era has a lot to answer for unnecessarily shaking the foundation of civilized values without putting anything really substantial in**

its place. I pose this query: What do we as a people do to preserve freedom of speech and freedom of the press and at the same time prevent or restrain that freedom from becoming a tool for intellectual, moral and political trivialisation of profound matters? This is an issue of general import in the contemporary world. In the peculiar context of the Caribbean where we have moved swiftly from a pre-literate society to one of complex mass communications without passing through a prolonged reading phase, the situation becomes even more challenging. An awful trivialisation of issues thus emerges from the culture, and increasingly the cult, of imperialism and the misuse or abuse of the mass media, especially the electronic media, by those who possess insufficiently developed, informed, or cultured minds. We in the Caribbean too often borrow the worst features of the American mass market in everything!

Leaders, too, are not immune from an increasing lack of virtue. In the Caribbean, the colonial inheritance, the gubernatorial pattern of governance, and the still commandist political system itself provide a fertile breeding ground for authoritarian personalities, which often cloak insecure souls, to wield political authority unwisely and to sometimes steal from the public purse. Too often, their lack of a virtuous self-mastery causes them also to ignore the treasured maxim that the greatest exercise of power is the restraint in the use of that power.

Rightly, good governance has become a policy condition for loans, technical assistance and debt relief granted by some developed countries to developing ones. My own government has, for example, benefited from substantial debt relief by the British government under the Commonwealth Debt Initiative (CDI) in which good governance is a major criterion. The predecessor region in St. Vincent and the Grenadines was disqualified for debt relief because of the insufficiency of its good governance benchmark.

Regional integration further bolsters the quest for good governance. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has at its centre a “Charter of Civil Society” which focuses on the regional commitment to liberal-democratic values and practices. It is this Charter, among other things, which prompted CARICOM to suspend Haiti from its councils because of that country’s failure to embrace democratic governance consequent upon the involuntary departure of President Jean Bertrand Aristide. In our small Caribbean nation-states, regional integration is not only an economic issue; it is also a democratic, good governance construct of the highest order.

This profound commitment by our region to democratic values constitutes an umbilical link to our giant neighbour to the north,

the United States of America. Unfortunately, too many leaders in the U.S.A., historically, have not sufficiently appreciated the depth and maturity of democracy in our Caribbean region. Sometimes, one is amused at the clumsy paternalism of American diplomats and leaders at practically every level of government.

It is this American attitude, in part, which prompted the late Errol Walton Barrow, Prime Minister of Barbados, in November 1986 to assert rightly:

*“It is dehumanising and false to view the Caribbean as potential American problems. We are peoples with an identity and culture and a history — the Parliament of Barbados will be 350 years old in 1989. We don’t need lessons in democracy from anyone. However severe the economic difficulties facing the Caribbean, we are viable, functioning societies with the intellectual and institutional resources to understand and grapple with our problems. Collectively, we have the resource potential necessary for our continued development and, of course, we have a heritage of exquisite natural beauty entrusted to us. The Caribbean is, after all, a civilisation.”*

In foreign relations between the United States and the Caribbean this is a matter of critical consideration. To be sure, the region is awash with only small nation-states but it is an error to deduce therefrom that they possess no sense of being in a defined seascape and landscape. These nation-states are not accidents, not dots on a map, not merely pieces of “nice real estate” — to use the infelicitous phrase of one American policy-maker of the 1980s. They contain populations with a history, a legitimacy and a trajectory of nobility. Africa, Europe, and Asia, all possessed of established and even ancient civilisations, meet daily, in harmony, at the geographic cross-roads known as the Caribbean. It has been a most remarkable journey, through the fever of history, which has brought us to a dynamic Caribbean civilisation, sui generis.

The dialogue, thus, ought not to be simply between a super-power on the one hand, and mini-states, on the other. That is a limited and limiting conversation. It ought to be between two civilisations — American and Caribbean — which are inextricably, intertwined through commerce, trade, culture, tourists, migrants, crime, security, and liberal democracy. This conversation demands a new language of discourse, grounded, jointly, in the people’s own humanisation. It cannot be the sterile diplomatic vocabulary of ancien regimes.

**It is through this new or refined language that together we can communicate a better understanding of the challenging world around us. Robert Frost, America's enduring poet laureate, sums it up aptly:**

**"I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-----  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference."**

**Thanks again! And May Almighty God continue to bless us all!**