

**THE US-CUBA ACCORD:
HOW THE CARIBBEAN PAVED THE WAY**

BY

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[GREETINGS!]

INTRODUCTION

The sixteen preceding annual Eric E. Williams Memorial Lectures, dating from the inaugural presentation by Dr. John Hope Franklin, Professor Emeritus Duke University, were all delivered by outstanding academics and distinguished political leaders, as befit the memory of the iconic Dr. Eric Williams, the towering Caribbean intellectual and political titan, the late Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago I feel truly humbled and honoured to be in the esteemed company of roll call of the invitees who have hitherto delivered the Eric E. Williams Memorial Lecture. Accordingly, I sincerely thank Mrs. Erica Williams-Connell; the Eric Williams

Memorial Collection Research Library, Archives and Museum; the Florida International University; and all the organisers of this Distinguished Lecture Series.

Permit me at the outset, to affirm yet again that I remain in awe of the sheer intellectual brilliance and monumental achievements which Eric Williams secured on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and our Caribbean civilisation. I met Eric Williams long before I was privileged to meet him personally in early 1969, when I was 22 years of age. My dear mother, who is still alive at 96 years of age, once embarrassed me in an interview which she gave to the Trinidad and Tobago Mirror newspaper in 2001, shortly after my accession to the Office of the Prime Minister, by recalling that in my early teenage years I would stand in front of the mirror in my room, gesticulating, and imitating the speech and cadences of Eric Williams' voice, as I imagined him in full stride in Parliament or Woodford Square. In those days, Williams' parliamentary and other addresses were broadcast live on "610 Radio Guardian" out of Trinidad. I would listen spellbound, to his voice, reason, and

command of language on the old box radio, those with the huge tubes, made by Grundig, a German company.

Later, as a student at the University of the West Indies, I would devour Williams' writings including: The series of monographs from his stint at the Caribbean Commission; the path-breaking Capitalism and Slavery; his autobiography Inward Hunger; British Historians in the West Indies; The Economics of Nationhood; A History of Trinidad and Tobago; and numerous pamphlets, including Massa Day Done, touching and concerning education, society, and political economy. Subsequently, like all students of Williams, I read with utter amazement his magisterial volume on Caribbean history, From Columbus to Castro, written while he was a sitting Prime Minister. The intellectual outpost of Williams was all absolutely incredible!

In early 1969, I met Dr. Williams personally. The occasion was a meeting of the Council of the University of the West Indies ___ the university's highest decision-making body ___ held at St. Augustine, Trinidad. Williams was representing Trinidad and Tobago; I was

representing the students; I was at that time President of the Guild of Undergraduates, UWI, Mona, Jamaica. Just imagine this: A 22-year old student sitting at the same table with regional political and academic titans such as Eric Williams, discussing the development of tertiary education in the West Indies. During the course of that day, I had the treasured opportunity to speak one-on-one with him. My most favourable predisposition towards him was fortified; I became an admirer, for life!

During my student days at Mona, Jamaica, one of my friends was Patrick Manning, who subsequently became an outstanding political leader of the People's National Movement and Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. I would listen raptly to Patrick's reflections and musings on Williams. Those discussions continued in a more mature fashion during the time Patrick and I served as Prime Ministers. I continue to study the life and work of Eric Williams. And there is some outstanding scholarly work which has been done on him including the contributions by Selwyn Cudjoe, Selwyn Ryan and Colin Palmer. Personally, I consider the best analysis ___ fair, balanced, well-researched, and insightful ___ is

Colin Palmer's book, Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean who delivered the eighth lecture in this Distinguished Lecture Series in 2006.

But this evening is not the occasion for me to speak about Eric Williams; the People's National Movement (PNM) — the Party which he built; and Williams' immense contribution to our Caribbean civilisation. I affirm, though, that my forty-seven years as a political activist, my 36 years in electoral politics, my 15 years thus far as Prime Minister have provided me with a bundle of insights on political praxis in our region to appreciate better the Eric Williams enterprise. Williams remains a teacher and a guide for me, in theory and practice, on our Caribbean political economy. His mind was too subtle and his practical endeavours so nuanced, yet principled, to admit to anyone being his disciple; indeed Williams bristled at those who proclaimed discipleship. Notwithstanding the polemical critiques of distinguished scholar-activists like C.L.R. James and Lloyd Best, any objective assessment of Eric Williams must conclude that he undoubtedly has a stellar record of accomplishments in every area of public life. And his PNM, despite

its limitations and weaknesses, possesses the phenomenal strengths and possibilities to advance in our region a sense of Caribbean nationhood, the upliftment of our Caribbean civilisation, economic development, equity, justice, democracy, and good governance; in short, the Williams' PNM remains in the vanguard of shaping the Caribbean as a modern, vibrant, post-colonial society in the evolving globalised, political architecture.

I turn now to embark substantively on our conversation tonight's subject — the US-Cuba Accord: How the Caribbean Paved the Way.

THE BACKDROP

On December 17, 2014, the American President, Barack Obama, and Cuban President Raul Castro announced the beginning of a process of normalising relations between Cuba and the United States of America (USA). The severe rupturing of hitherto normal relations between these two hemispheric states had initially arisen subsequent to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and moreso after the

then Cuban President Fidel Castro had declared in 1961 that Cuba was pursuing a “socialist” path. Meanwhile, from the early years of the Cuban Revolution, the US government hatched and executed a covert and overt policy to topple the revolutionary regime in Cuba. On January 03, 1961, the USA withdrew diplomatic recognition of the Cuban government and closed its embassy in Havana. In April 1961, Cuba successfully resisted the Bay of Pigs invasion led by the American government in concert with Cuban exiles.

By then the American isolation of Cuba was in full swing. Swiftly, the American government imposed a trade and economic embargo on Cuba, cut financial and corresponding banking arrangements, blocked the flow of remittances to Cuba, and sharply restricted the travel of Americans to Cuba. Accompanying all this, was a series of targeted policies and programmes against the Cuban government including political, psychological, propaganda offensives, military and intelligence activities, assassination attempts against the Cuban leadership, and diplomatic measures. At each turn, the Cuban government resisted all these American efforts; instituted counter-measures of one kind or another; deepened and extended

its socialist-communist re-ordering of the Cuban society and political economy; waged an anti-imperialist campaign against the USA particularly in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean; cemented its ties with the Soviet Union, and became a member of the so-called “Soviet Bloc”; and, overall, defended the integrity of the Cuban revolutionary process and State.

At the height of the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union in the 1960s, no Latin American country save and except Mexico, maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba. At the insistence of the governments of the USA and the vast majority of those of Latin America, Cuba was expelled from the Organisation of American States (OAS).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies in the late 1980s to the early 1990s brought an effective end to the Cold War. The impact of the collapse of those regimes which travelled under the rubric of “international commission” wreaked socio-economic havoc in Cuba. A “special period” was inaugurated

as the Cuban Revolution fought for its survival and embarked on a re-arrangement of its emphases in international relations.

The imminent demise of the Cuban Revolution was gleefully predicted in influential circles in government and academia in the USA. Opportunities were thus seized to tighten the screws against Cuba: Legislative measures were passed in the US Congress to tighten American sanctions against Cuba, including through the use of extra-territorial jurisdiction, as manifested in the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992. (“the Toricelli Law”), the Cuban Liberty and Democracy Solidarity Act of 1996 (“the Helms-Burton Act”); US President G.W. Bush’s well-funded initiative in 2003 called the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba; and the overall political and diplomatic measures devised in accordance with President Bush’s declaration in 2004 that Cuba was one of the few “outposts of tyranny” remaining in the world. Indeed, at a CARICOM-USA Summit in 2007 in Washington, co-chaired by President Bush and me, he unambiguously declared that Cuba was a land of “unfreedom” to which the USA was obliged “to deliver freedom”. When Fidel Castro resigned as President of Cuba in 2008, the US

Deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte, insisted that the United States would maintain its embargo against Cuba. This policy stance remained in effect until the Obama “normalisation opening” of December 2014. On July 20, 2015, the United States of America and Cuba restored diplomatic relations which had been severed 54 years earlier. Since then several other ameliorative steps on the normalisation process have been taken by the USA, but the essence of the trade, economic, and financial embargo remains for further legislative and executive action in the USA.

By the time President Obama had elaborated his “normalisation process”, most of the world has already determined that American policy in relation to Cuba had failed; indeed, it was viewed globally as a ridiculous anachronism, a relic of the Cold War, and an untenable, unnecessary and undesirable fissure in the hemispheric family. Even the hitherto near-monolithic consensus in the Cuban émigré community in South Florida in favour of isolating the Cuban government had given way to a more nuanced acceptance of a normalisation of relations between the USA and Cuba. Moreover,

polling data indicate that a significant majority of Americans were supportive of “normalisation”.

THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY AND CUBA: THE SETTING

A bundle of circumstances has always pre-disposed and induced the member-states of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Cuba to establish, and nurture, people-to-people links and state-to-state relations, despite the rupture occasioned by Cold War politics in the decade 1962 to 1972. Geographic closeness, European colonisation, ties of commerce and migration, and security considerations prompted and sustained these linkages.

Britain, the colonial power in the Anglophone Caribbean, had friendly relations with pre-revolutionary Cuba in the first half of the 20th century. Citizens of Caribbean countries migrated to Cuba to work in the service industries and on the sugar plantations. Indeed, my paternal grandfather migrated to Cuba from St. Vincent for a two-year period to work as a cane-cutter in Oriente Province during the late 1920s. Santiago de Cuba was heavily populated by

Caribbean nationals especially from Jamaica and Haiti. Raul Castro told me three or so years ago that his initial love for Jamaica and Haiti sprung from his interactions as a boy with two migrants from the Caribbean: One, a Jamaican lady, whom his father hired to teach him English — unsuccessfully as it turned out; and the second, a Haitian woman, who assisted his mother in the household. The offspring of Caribbean migrants are to be found all over Cuba today, particularly in and around Havana and Santiago de Cuba. The recent liberalisation of Cuba's emigration policies has prompted many of the descendants of these earlier immigrants from the Caribbean to return to the lands of their forbears to live and work. We in St. Vincent and the Grenadines have received dozens of descendants of those great-grandparents and grandparents who had earlier migrated from our country to Cuba. For quite some time now, dating from the 1990s, there have been no visa requirements between Cuba and several CARICOM countries, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Four member-states of CARICOM, namely, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago established diplomatic relations

with Cuba on December 08, 1972, in an independent, sovereign act in the face of strong opposition from their traditional ally, the USA. Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, led respectively at the time by Michael Manley and Eric Williams, had become independent nation-states in 1962. Barbados and Guyana, led respectively in 1972 by Errol Barrow and Forbes Burnham, had acceded to independence in 1966. None of these four leaders was a communist; at the same time they were not anti-communist; they were non-communists. Manley and Burnham had declared themselves to be proponents of a particular brand of “socialism” — “democratic socialism” in the case of Manley and “cooperative socialism” in Burnham’s. Barrow was a social democrat of the Fabian variety, the principles of which were applied to his country with a common-sense Barbardianness. And Williams was a pragmatist who embraced “the free enterprise” system but who was, at the same time, partisan towards active state ownership of some central parts of the economy. These four leaders, though, were all nationalists and regionalists who saw Cuba as part of the Caribbean family and never subscribed to the isolationist policy of the USA towards Cuba.

An insight into Williams' thinking of the oneness of a Caribbean identity can be gleaned from his address delivered at a Special Convention of his People's National Movement in November 1970 in Chaguaramas, Trinidad, entitled "The Chaguaramas Declaration ____ Perspective for a New Society". In this comprehensive policy statement delivered in the aftermath of the so-called "February 1970 Revolution", an anti-Williams uprising, Williams affirmed:

"In the age of independence, many of the governments are now actively engaged in the task of nation-building. This simultaneous process is bound to assist in the emergence of both a national and a Caribbean identity, especially if it is accompanied by a greater awareness of the Caribbean past and by the very real achievement of such great Caribbean leaders as Hatuey in Cuba, Enriquillo in Santo Domingo, Cuffy in Guyana, Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti, George William Gordon in Jamaica, José Martí in Cuba, Cipriani and Butler in Trinidad and Tobago. It must also be accompanied by a greater awareness of non-Commonwealth Caribbean literature ____ for example, Aime

Cesaire in Martinique, Jacques Roumain in Haiti, Nicolas Guillen in Cuba.”

Williams envisioned, too, vital economic and political dimensions to this construction of a Caribbean identity. In the same speech, he advised that:

“The Caribbean must look increasingly towards the other countries of the Third World. There is Latin America, which is still struggling for identity and self-realisation. The Caribbean has for far too long been an outsider in the New World and needs to become more closely linked with the other under-privileged countries in the Western Hemisphere ---- We in the Caribbean and the other peoples of the Third World need each other in respect of markets and in respect of providing a common front against economic domination by the metropolitan countries and in favour of improving the structure of international economic relations to our benefit. These considerations make it imperative for us to maintain and develop diplomatic

relations with the countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia — as we stated quite unambiguously in The People's Charter in 1956.”

In his book, Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean, Professor Colin Palmer, renders to us an apt analysis:

“Throughout his career, Eric Williams never wavered from his vision of a politically and economically integrated Anglophone Caribbean. He imagined a closer association with other countries in the Caribbean but felt that ideally such arrangements would be restricted to those nations that embraced democratic ideals. In the early 1960s Williams was deeply suspicious of Fidel Castro’s motives in the region and had little contact with him or his government.----- Still, by 1964, he was willing to accept Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic into the larger Caribbean economic union that he was contemplating. Williams envisaged a Caribbean region free from colonial

rule, responsible for its own destiny, and integrated, if not politically, at least economically.”

Errol Barrow of Barbados, ostensibly the least militantly vocal of the four Caribbean leaders who caused the establishment of diplomatic relations between their countries and Cuba in 1972, made some striking comments on this matter in a conversation I had with him in 1977. He considered it an absurdity for the United States of America to expect that independent Caribbean countries would construct their relations with Cuba ___ a Caribbean nation ___ through the prism of super-power vainglory and on the basis of American presidential politics of South Florida ___ a pointed reference to the political pandering of candidates for the American Presidency to anti-Castro Cuban migrants in and around Miami.

Barrow told me an interesting story about the American government's attempt to have him disinvite the Cuban government to Barbados' independence celebrations in November 1966. The Barbados government had invited, among others, the representatives of both the USA and Cuba to attend the celebration

of its attainment of independent nationhood. The US State Department was not pleased. So, an official of the American government, derisively referred to by Barrow as “some ‘factotum’ of the State Department”, informed him that the USA would not send a representative to the celebrations if the invitation to Cuba was not withdrawn. Indignantly, Barrow, an erudite Caribbean man of dignity and aristocratic bearing yet with a common touch, telephoned Secretary of State Robert Mc Namara whom he had known since Mc Namara’s time at the World Bank, and enquired about the descent of “American manners”. Barrow was astounded that an invited guest to his metaphoric house could lay-down such a rude condition for its attendance. Mc Namara agreed with Barrow that “good manners” precluded the USA from such diplomatic rudeness. Both Cuba and the USA attended Barbados, independence celebrations; and the world did not come to an end!

Michael Manley of Jamaica and Forbes Burnham were bitingly anti-imperialist and resented any American dictation of their countries’ foreign policy. For them, Cuba was a fully-paid up member of our Caribbean civilisation with whom the independent Caribbean

nations of our region must, as a matter of principle, establish and strengthen diplomatic, political and economic ties. As far as they were concerned, Cuba's embrace of Marxism-Leninism in its re-ordering of that country's political economy was a matter for the Cuban people and their leaders. They insisted that the principle of non-interference in another country's internal affairs was, in this case, inviolable. They held aloft the Charter of the United Nations as relevant and applicable.

THE PRAXIS OF CUBA-CARICOM RELATIONS

As the other eight Anglophone Caribbean countries acceded to independence, all of them followed the original four in establishing and building excellent relations with Cuba: Antigua and Barbados, Bahamas, Belize, the Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Suriname and Haiti, the two non-Anglophone Caribbean nations with membership in CARICOM, had hitherto established diplomatic relations prior to their membership of that regionally body.

Indeed, even prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba by these Caribbean States, the Cuban government acting through one or more of its several agencies established links with civil society organisations. Among other things, Cuban Friendship Societies were formed in all Caribbean countries. And in some countries, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the Communist Party of Cuba kept organised links with progressive, nationalist and anti-imperialist political parties or movements in the region.

Every CARICOM member-state has had a diplomatic mission in Cuba for several years now; and Cuba has had, similarly a person of ambassadorial rank at each of its embassies in every Caribbean country. Of other nations, globally, only Brazil and Venezuela have diplomatic missions, physically, in every CARICOM country.

Cuba and CARICOM member-states are closely engaged in bilateral, functional cooperation principally in the areas of education, health, sports, culture, science and technology, energy, disaster preparedness, and regional integration. There have been dramatic

examples of this functional cooperation from which CARICOM member-states have benefitted immensely: Thousands of Caribbean students have obtained their university education in Cuba on Cuban scholarships; subsidised tertiary medical care and treatment have been accorded to CARICOM nationals in Cuban hospitals; the Miracle Mission Eye Programme, in conjunction with Venezuela, has seen several thousands of Caribbean nationals, receive surgical treatment on their eyes at Cuban facilities, free of cost; Cuban doctors, nurses, and other professionals in diverse disciplines can be found in most Caribbean countries; and Cuba has assisted immeasurably in disaster preparedness and energy efficiency in several CARICOM countries.

There is, too, a subsisting Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement between Cuba and CARICOM member-states. However, trade and economic exchange between them have not increased markedly largely on account of the high cost and limited availability of air and sea transportation, legal and institutional challenges in Cuba, an information deficit on trade and investment opportunities, an insufficiency of credit and finance mechanisms, and the United

States' economic embargo against Cuba. There is nevertheless a huge potential for growth in trade inasmuch as the Agreement provides for duty free access, with no customs duties, for 297 products from CARICOM countries and 47 from Cuba.

Cuba-CARICOM cooperation is also evident in the area of tourism. For example, the Issa and Super Clubs hotel chains from Jamaica have invested in hotel development at the exquisite Veradero Beach in Cuba. Functional cooperation further exists through the Caribbean Tourism Organisation.

At the level of political and diplomatic relations, Cuba and the CARICOM member-states have been active members of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), established in 1994; the Regional Negotiating Machinery (RNM) on trade; the increasingly influential Community of States of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC) set up in 2013 and includes all nation-states in the western hemisphere save and except the USA and Canada; and the Group of Latin America (GRULAC) at the United Nations. Several CARICOM member-countries and Cuba have, for several years,

been actively participating in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77. So, too, has been their participation in the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group (ACP) which Cuba joined in 2000 and which interfaces structurally with the European Union. Further, six member-countries of CARICOM which constitute the majority of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, namely Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, are members of the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA) along with Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. ALBA membership provides these six CARICOM member-states with non-reciprocal “free trade” opportunities and access to loans from the ALBA Bank on very concessionary terms. ALBA, above all else though, is a regional political entity with a particular world view which is often at odds with that of the USA, particularly on hemispheric issues, especially on the complex Cuban question, the defence of sovereignty and independence, and the right of each nation to pursue its own political path in accordance with the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

The journey from the establishment of formal diplomatic relation with Cuba by the so-called “Big Four” (Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago) of CARICOM in 1972 to the present time has been characterised by unevenness, highs and lows, inactivism and spurts of activism, gradualism and courageous leaps, consolidation and expansion. Through it all, we have arrived at very close solidarity ties of friendship between Cuba and CARICOM member-states. Let us sketch some signposts, highlights, and meanderings on this remarkable journey.

SOME SIGNPOSTS AND MEANDERINGS OF THE CUBA-CARICOM NEXUS

Some three years after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and CARICOM’s “Big Four”, a major test arose for CARICOM over the matter of the grant or denial of permission to Cuba for its military planes to re-fuel on their journey to Angola in support of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and its military wing, the Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) led by Augustine Neto, who had led Angola to independence in November 1975. The internal opposition to the

MPLA was the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) led by Jonas Savimbi who was supported militarily by the USA and the apartheid regime in South Africa.

At first, Barbados had agreed to the refuelling of the Cuban planes, but under pressure from the American government, Errol Barrow withdrew his permission; he was apparently nervous about the possible adverse impact of such a decision on his country's vital tourism industry. Forbes Burnham of Guyana had no such qualms. Accordingly, his government allowed the refuelling of the Cuban planes en route to Angola despite the personal appeal of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger not to do so. Burnham stood firm despite American threats of reprisals against Guyana. As far as Burnham was concerned Cuba was, metaphorically, on the side of the angels in fighting to defend Angola's independence and to halt the proxy hegemony of apartheid South Africa. As events unfolded in Angola, South West Africa, and South Africa, Forbes Burnham was vindicated. In fact, much later in 1987/88, at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, the Cuban and Angolan armed forces delivered a stinging defeat to UNITA and apartheid South Africa,

supported by military hardware and more from the USA, a battle which Nelson Mandela, President of a free South Africa, referred to in a speech in Cuba in 1991 as “marking an important step in the struggle to free the continent and our country of the scourge of apartheid”.

Between March 13, 1979 and October 1983, a second major test emerged for CARICOM in its relations with Cuba in respect of the Grenada Revolution. Grenada had acceded to independence from Britain in 1974; it was the first of the smaller territories in the Anglophone Caribbean to become independent, following upon the so-called “Big Four” between 1962 and 1966. On March 13, 1979, a revolutionary democratic political movement called the New Jewel Movement (NJM) led by Maurice Bishop overthrew, by revolutionary means, the increasingly autocratic, though democratically-elected, regime of Eric Gairy. It was the first time, since colonial conquest and settlement that a government had come to power in the Anglophone Caribbean other than by the ballot box. The American government, suspicious of the anti-imperialist and socialist-oriented outlook of the NJM and the revolutionary government, withheld its

recognition of it. At the same time, the Caribbean led by Burnham's Guyana and Manley's Jamaica swiftly recognised the revolutionary government in Grenada. Cuba followed suit almost immediately. Eventually, the US government fell in line after recognition of the new Grenada government was accorded by Britain, other European countries, and the bulk of nations globally. The OECS and the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU) endorsed Grenada's continued membership in them; and Grenada, for its own domestic reasons, pulled out of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court and established its own national court system, based on Britain common law, but with a suspended Constitution, which had a "Bill of Rights". The revolutionary government in Grenada pointedly did not sever ties with the British crown; thus, the Office of the Governor General remained intact, representing the Queen of the United Kingdom as Grenada's titular Head of State. It was a peculiar pragmatic arrangement designed to foster widespread acceptance and to promote a sense of continuity amidst revolutionary change. It was the very occupant of the Office of Governor General, Sir Paul Scoon, who purportedly invited the Reagan administration in the USA to intervene militarily when the

Grenada Revolution imploded, through factional in-fighting, in October 1983.

Throughout the short life of the Grenada Revolution, the US government was stridently on the attack against it in divers ways. Meanwhile, CARICOM and the OECS accepted the revolutionary government in Grenada through the embrace of the doctrine of “political pluralism”, an expression of the doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. At the same time, Cuba and revolutionary Grenada deepened markedly their relations, including military and security cooperation. Although several more conservative CARICOM governments were uneasy about, or even opposed to, the Grenada Revolution, they all accepted the reality on the ground in Grenada. In any event, across the Caribbean, governments and peoples viewed Grenada as a member of the Caribbean family, and as such deserving of their support and understanding. The US government held no such familial feelings and saw Grenada in puerile ideological terms, through the prism of Cold War politics, as an island outpost of

emerging “communism” in league with Cuba and revolutionary Nicaragua under the Sandinistas.

Indeed after the collapse of the Grenada Revolution, the American government elaborated a false narrative about Cuba’s support for the extreme left insurgency within the NJM which led to the assassination of Maurice Bishop and the demise of the Revolution. Indeed, Cuba was supportive of Bishop personally and was caught unawares of the “infantile disorder” that had gripped the anti-Bishop faction.

The defeat of the Michael Manley government in Jamaica in 1980 by the decidedly pro-American Jamaica Labour Party under the leadership of Edward Seaga and the collapse of the Grenada Revolution in October 1983, presaged a sea change in Jamaica’s hitherto close relations which existed with Cuba during the 1972 to 1980 period. Indeed, Seaga recalled Jamaica’s ambassador to Cuba, downgraded Cuba’s diplomatic presence in Jamaica, and terminated the functional cooperation arrangements between Jamaica and Cuba. Meanwhile, Jamaica deepened its political and

economic arrangements with the USA under the Ronald Reagan administration and entered into a structural adjustment agreement with the International Monetary Fund. The return of Michael Manley's PNP to office in Jamaica in the 1989 – 1992 period occasioned a return of a closer Cuba-Jamaica nexus, though not as cozy as the earlier Manley era of 1972 to 1980. Henceforth, through four succeeding Prime Ministerships from 1992 up to the present, Jamaica has maintained warm and quite friendly relations with Cuba.

Indeed, even after the Jamaica Labour Party's resumption of office in the September 2007 to November 2011 period under Bruce Golding, a former member of Edward Seaga's Cabinet in 1980 – 1989, Jamaica's excellent relations with Cuba were consolidated. In a dramatic move, signally a prompt distancing from Seaga's earlier cooling of ties with Cuba, Golding took nearly half of his Cabinet to Cuba to deepen further the extent of functional cooperation in a range of socio-economic matters.

In the decade or so after the collapse of the Grenada Revolution, the CARICOM member-states' relations with Cuba remained largely formal, save and except in the case of Guyana where the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) of Forbes Burnham and Desmond Hoyte and the opposition People's Progressive Party (PPP) of Cheddi Jagan were always strong advocates of closer relations with Cuba, though Hoyte's PNC was found to be frequently equivocating in the period after Burnham's death in (1985 – 92). Indeed, in that decade of the early 1980s to early 1990s, in the era of “the Washington Consensus” and the dominant years of the Ronald Reagan – Margaret Thatcher axis, governments more accommodating to American foreign policy and interests came to office across the CARICOM region especially in Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, Edward Seaga became the leader of the pro-USA pan-Caribbean political entity known as the Caribbean Democratic Union (CDU), a branch of the International Democratic Union in which the Republican Party in the USA, the Conservative Party in Britain, and the Christian Democrats in Germany were dominant.

Interestingly, in October 1992, the CARICOM member-states were lukewarm to the Cuban-sponsored resolution at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly which called for a condemnation of the American blockade of Cuba. In 1992, this resolution was passed by a vote of 59 to 3 with 71 abstentions, and only Barbados and Jamaica of CARICOM voted with Cuba; the other member-states of CARICOM either abstained or were not present for the voting. However, one year later, in November 1993, the voting pattern of the CARICOM countries in this Cuban resolution had markedly shifted: Ten of the twelve CARICOM states (The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago) censured Washington's position. They were among 88 countries which voted with Cuba; four were opposed, 57 abstained, and 35 did not vote. In 1993, only Antigua-Barbuda and Grenada stood askance from the CARICOM consensus. Thereafter, CARICOM member-states have remained solid with Cuba on this annual anti-blockade UN resolution.

It is evident that the independent and regionalist spirit of CARICOM member-states in relation to Cuba, reasserted itself in the post-1992 era which saw the crumbling of the Soviet Union, the collapse of centrally-planned regimes in Eastern Europe, and a correspondingly altered foreign policy outreach of Cuba, including in the Caribbean region.

Prior to the unravelling of the “communist” regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1989 – 1992 period, Cuba’s foreign policy was focussed on a triad: The “communist” bloc of countries globally; liberation movements world-wide, especially in Africa; and Latin America. Its relations with CARICOM countries were generally cordial with episodes of closer relations with friendly governments, namely, revolutionary Grenada (1979 – 1983), Michael Manley’s Jamaica (1972 – 1980), and Forbes Burnham’s Guyana (1972 – 1985). The demise of the Soviet bloc of countries compelled Cuba to alter its foreign policy emphases, including its determined outreach in the CARICOM region where it saw immense potential for enhanced economic cooperation and political linkages within the context of its battle against American hostilities. At the

centre of Cuba's outreach to CARICOM member-countries was its determination to demonstrate its principled internationalist solidarity in its immediate geographic neighbourhood.

In an interesting paper authored in 2015 by Dr. Jacqueline Laguardia Martinez, a graduate of the University of Havana and a Lecturer at the Institute of International Relations, University of the West Indies, and entitled Cuba and CARICOM in the Changing Environment, the following observation is made:

“The implosion of the USSR and the European Socialist Bloc altered the World Balance. Cuba faced a severe economic crisis and was compelled to incorporate market mechanisms, receive foreign investors and accept hard currency circulation. The loss of its main international associates forced the island to build new alliances. --- The post-Cold War context opened to Cuba the possibility of improving the relationship with the Caribbean. The island, while trying to recover its economy without adopting the neo-liberal recipe, promoted a more active

participation in regional fora, especially where the United States did not participate. Since 1992 Cuba has counted on the Caribbean countries for a general condemnation [at the United Nations] of the U.S. Embargo.”

One author, H. Michael Erisman of Indiana State University, in a 1994 paper entitled Evolving Cuban-CARICOM Relations: A Comparative Cost/Benefit Analyses (Presented at the 1994 Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association in Merida, Mexico), labelled the post-1992 Cuban initiative in CARICOM as “a peculiar courtship” to which he contended that CARICOM’s response was even “more remarkable”. Erisman astutely observes that:

“Previously the cultural/ideological differences that distinguished the English-speaking Caribbean from Cuba combined with concern about U.S. vindictiveness would likely have served to thwart any serious engagement. But clearly the phenomenon of the new international political order that has attracted so much attention at the global

level has also arrived in the Caribbean, one of its most dramatic manifestations being the willingness of the CARICOM countries to embrace Havana's integration efforts despite Washington's threats of retaliation."

Among Cuba's overtures to CARICOM was its request for an official observer status in this august body. At CARICOM's 13th Heads of Government Conference in Trinidad in June 1992, although Cuba's request was not approved, the Conference of Heads agreed to establish a Joint Commission with Cuba to explore the prospects for greater CARICOM-Cuba cooperation in the areas of trade, developmental programmes, and cultural exchanges. This significant decision was taken despite pressure from the American government to persuade CARICOM to the contrary.

The US government, including the Congress, misread entirely CARICOM's mature, non-ideological embrace of Cuba and the prickly independent spirit of CARICOM's leaders and peoples. The post-Cold War attempts by the American Congress to tighten the screws on Cuba were seen by CARICOM's leadership as crude,

misguided, and even insulting to their elemental sense of what was right and wrong. So, when the Torricelli Bill with its extra-territorial trade absurdities against Cuba was passed in Congress, and signed into law by President Clinton, CARICOM member-countries stiffened their resolve. This was perhaps best illustrated by the reaction of Eugenia Charles, Prime Minister of Dominica and an early anti-communist supporter of President Ronald Reagan, who remarked that:

“I don’t think that the embargo should continue ___ they should let people trade with Cuba if they want to -----.”

Indeed, Prime Minister Charles insisted that Dominica would trade with Cuba as long as it remained profitable to do so. She bluntly informed the region that:

*“The U.S. must realise that we in CARICOM are independent countries and in the same way that they choose their friends, we must be allowed to choose ours.---
If they haven’t realised that the Cold War is over, we*

have.” [Quoted in CubaINFO, Volume5, No. 5, April 12, 1993, p.4.]

In 1993, the heavy hand of members of the US Congress and the White House was again rebuffed. This time it concerned CARICOM's decision at its 14th Summit in the Bahamas (July 1993) to accept Cuba's insistence on deleting any reference to democracy, human rights, or any similar pre-condition for cooperation in the draft document of the Cuba-CARICOM Joint Cooperation Commission. The document, which was signed, was modelled in similar CARICOM accords with Mexico and Venezuela in which such matters were not raised or included.

The Clinton administration officials had robustly lobbied the CARICOM Heads of Government Conference in the Bahamas to adopt the American approach of utilising economic levers to compel political concessions from Cuba. These U.S. officials did not succeed. Some members of the U.S. Congress were palpably hysterical in their entreaties to CARICOM. Led by the anti-communist crusader against Cuba, Robert Torricelli (Democrat,

New Jersey and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on Western Hemispheric Affairs), several members of the U.S. House of Representatives sent a letter to CARICOM's leaders threatening to deny their countries any future trade concessions, if they did not rescind their decision to delete the human rights provisions from their agreement with Cuba. The last paragraph of this letter reads as follows:

“We had hoped that it would be possible to construct a free trade area in this hemisphere based on our countries’ shared commitment to democratic values. Regrettably, those of us who have promoted this concept in the Congress must now reconsider our support for it. It simply is not possible for us to support the extension of trade benefits to the Caribbean region if we believe that the ultimate beneficiary will be the Cuban dictatorship.”

CARICOM stood firm in the face of this thinly-veiled economic blackmail. In a cogent, mature response to the authors of the Torricelli letter, CARICOM's distinguished Secretary General at the

time, Dr. Edwin Carrington, wrote in his missive of August 19, 1993, in part, as follows:-

“The basic relationship which the Caribbean Community and its Member States maintain with Cuba, and which it is not proposed to change, can be viewed in the same light as those which presently exist between Cuba and other hemispheric countries such as Canada and Mexico. CARICOM Heads of Government have noted that Canada is in a Free Trade Area with the United States. Also that Canada, Mexico and the United States propose to launch the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) in January 1994. They therefore find it difficult to understand the basis for the concerns that the economic benefits from free trade between the United States and CARICOM will flow through to Cuba from a Technical Cooperation Agreement when that does not occur in other cases.”

This very stance was maintained by five nationalist Caribbean nationalist leaders (Cheddi Jagan of Guyana, Erskine Sandiford of

Barbados, Patrick Manning of Trinidad-Tobago, P.J. Patterson of Jamaica, and Hubert Ingraham of the Bahamas) in their meeting with President Clinton in Washington on August 30, 1993.

On December 13, 1993, the CARICOM-Joint Cuba Commission was established at an official signing-ceremony in Guyana. The American government, which had invested so much time, energy and resources ___ political and otherwise ___ to derail this Cuba-CARICOM agreement had spectacularly failed to do so. CARICOM's fortitude in this matter was grounded in commonsense, the interest of the people of Cuba and the Caribbean, and the sensibility of the necessity and desirability of healing the hemispheric fracture with Cuba. The Joint Commission Agreement, renewable every five years, covers a wide range of economic, technological and cultural collaboration, biotechnology, trade, private investment, and tourism. Relevant working groups to implement the Agreement were set up. Subsequently, too, Cuba has signed bilateral Joint Commission Agreements with every CARICOM member-state. These are splendid examples of a mature regionalism.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the so-called “Big Four” of CARICOM, the first of the triennial Cuba-CARICOM Summits convened in Havana, Cuba. Thirteen of the fourteen CARICOM Heads (11 Prime Ministers and the Presidents of Guyana and Haiti) were present; Suriname was represented by its Vice-President. In an article entitled “Cuba, CARICOM Cement Ties” and published in the Guyana Chronicle of December 15, 2002, the late, great Caribbean intellectual Professor Norman Girvan, correctly commented that this inaugural Cuba-CARICOM Summit “marked a new stage in the consolidation of political and economic relations among these fifteen states of the Greater Caribbean region.” Henceforth, December 8th has been observed as Cuba-CARICOM Day!

On that occasion in 2002, President Fidel Castro of Cuba declared that with the establishment of diplomatic relations, in December 1972, the four CARICOM countries:

“---[W]ere charting the course for what would later become the foreign policy of the Caribbean community, characterised until today by three main features: independence, courage and concerted action.”

On November 30th, 2014, two weeks before the dramatic Obama-Castro announcement on the re-opening of the “normalisation process”, the respected European journalist, David Jessop, in an article entitled “time for a deeper Cuba-CARICOM Relationship” offered the view that:

“In Washington, it is now accepted at the highest reaches of the Administration that Cuba’s reform process is real and that the US approach is outmoded. As one insider noted recently, the intellectual battle in the White House for a change of policy is won; the issue now is about how, when, substance, and deciding whether engagement will be ‘Cuba lite’ or ‘Cuba heavy’.”

In April 2015, I was at the table representing St. Vincent and the Grenadines at the historic Summit of the Americas in Panama which both the President of the United States of America and the President of Cuba attended together for the first time. The USA-Cuba thaw was proceeding, but the core of the economic and financial embargo has remained, President Obama cautiously mapped the path forward and called for changes in Cuba's political set-up; President Raul Castro reciprocated with cautious optimism of the way forward but insisted that Cuba would not alter its political system. So, the unpredictable, though inevitable, process of change has been unleashed; the unfolding is fascinating to watch. Every interested party in this evolving political shake-up, including the member-countries of CARICOM, has to embrace the possibilities therein and avoid the mis-steps or pitfalls which may lie ahead.

No less a personage than the American Vice-President, Joe Biden, has credited CARICOM in pointing the way for political normalisation with Cuba and making the arguments for meaningful engagement. This summary assessment is correct but the reality

has been more complex, and the journey more tortuous and complicated. Still, we in CARICOM have been for forty-three years in the vanguard in the western hemisphere in advocating “normalisation” with Cuba.

As Presidents Obama and Castro made their carefully-scripted announcement in December 2014, the Cuban government and the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines were engaged in mutually beneficial relations but from which my country has been the disproportionate beneficiary. I emphasise two projects ___ one in health, the other in physical infrastructure ___ to signal the value of multi-national and people-to-people bonds of friendship. The first is the seamless interaction between health professionals from the USA under the impressive World Pediatric Project, a non-governmental entity based in Virginia and Missouri, and Cuban health professionals under the Integrated Cuban Assistance Programme at my country’s premier hospital. The second project relates to the construction of the Argyle International Airport, the largest ever capital project undertaken in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The international cooperation on this project includes

contributions from the governments of Cuba, Venezuela, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, Austria, Ghaddafi's Libya, Ahmadinejad's Iran, Georgia, and the State Export Credit Guarantee arrangements of the governments of the USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Some 100 Cuban professionals are rendering their services on this vital airport project which is almost completed. All of this occurs within the context of an enabling framework of excellent diplomatic and political relations grounded in the principle of internationalist solidarity. We in the Caribbean have for years been doing sensible, practical things in concert with Cuba while the USA has acted with super-power vainglory and in response to the narrow imperatives of its domestic politics.

At the second Cuba-CARICOM Summit in 2005, President Fidel Castro paid homage to the memory of four titans of the Caribbean (Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, Michael Manley of Jamaica, Errol Barrow of Barbados, and Forbes Burnham of Guyana). Tonight, honour and thanks are accorded especially to the role of Eric Williams without whom the historic opening of the Anglophone Caribbean with Cuba in 1972 would not have occurred. That was

the real beginning of the normalisation process with Cuba in the western hemisphere!

Thank you!