

THE OECS: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

By

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{Formal Greetings}

This year we commemorate the 24th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Basseterre which gave birth to the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) in 1981. The OECS itself emerged out of the earlier integrative efforts, namely, the West Indies Associated States (WISA) Council of Ministers and the Eastern Caribbean Common Market. The focus of the Treaty of Basseterre rested upon eighteen (18) areas of function co-operation. Still, the spirit which infused its pages presaged something much more profound. The founders of the OECS wrote their foundation document ever mindful of the factors which both pre-disposed and induced its member-states to an on-going, dynamic, and even deeper union. Twenty-four (24) years ago, our leaders fashioned an OECS which they considered to be the optimal framework which the political market could bear. It was never their intention for it to be cast in a mould of immovable concrete and steel, for all time. The Treaty of Basseterre was never conceived as Mosaic Law, handed down to us on tablets of stone. The Treaty is a living organism with an in-built capacity to evolve and change, in the interest of our own humanisation, in response to the changing external environment of the international political economy and the internal dynamics of our respective countries. Our challenge, thus, is to make more perfect our union in an age of modern globalisation, trade liberalisation, and the revolution in information technology, against the backdrop of our experiences as small island developing states. The agenda of this 41st Meeting of the OECS Authority addresses, in part, this challenge, especially in its quest to review the Treaty so as to accommodate the prospect of an economic union and the consequential alterations in the governance of the sub-regional political apparatus.

The world into which the OECS was born in 1981 is very different to that which exists today. In the sub-region itself, there is now a growing consensus as to the way forward. This is evident, for example, in the elaboration of the OECS Development Charter and Strategy which document reads like a Manifesto for these times. In 1981, the sub-region was racked by the issue of ideological pluralism as a consequence of the reality and dream of the Grenada Revolution which self-destructed and consumed itself with the assassination of its leader, Maurice Bishop, by fellow so-called revolutionaries.

Today, there is not so much an ideological monism or unity as there is a more practical realization that there is much more in our Caribbean civilisation which unites us than divides us and that succumbing to the imperial divide and rule, whether under the rubric of old-fashioned colonialism or a "cold war" imposition arraigned along the communist/ anti-communist divide, was foolish, debilitating and unproductive. Indeed, the very Treaty of Basseterre and the circumstances of its origins recognised all this, but the ideational fog engendered by external forces, and mock battles internally, stunted this recognition and the full realisation of a deeper union within our interest.

In 1981, too, there were super-power rivalries. Today, for better or for worse, there is one super-power, a section of which ruling elite appears drunk with a fearsome triumphalism which threatens completely the sovereignty and independence of weaker nation-states, and our very humanity, freedom and dignity.

Further, in 1981, trade protectionism especially for our bananas and sugar held sway. Today, trade liberalisation and the diktat of supra-national entities such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have all but swept trade protectionism away. Interestingly, lectures on the virtues of international competitiveness and free trade are delivered to us authoritatively by the captains of modern capitalism at the very same time as they conspire to block our competitiveness

in international financial services, through a unilateral determination, by those very captains, that our competitive tax regimes amount to “harmful taxation”. This is the self-same story, though told in different forms, in other areas of economic activity where we find some space, as though in our very landscape and seascape, we are destined to stand perpetually amidst the alien corn.

In 1981, finance capital which for 100 years had been mutating overseas from out of the citadels of the metropolises, had yet to be consolidated and deified under the rubric of globalisation, which is but a modern variant of imperialism. Accompanying and facilitating all this has been the revolution in information technology. In 1981, the secretary who typed the original draft of the Treaty of Basseterre must have done so on an old-fashioned manual or, at best, electric typewriter. This speech was put together on a computer and immediately transmitted hither and thither. In 1981, St. Vincent and the Grenadines was celebrating the relative novelty of direct dialing on the old-fashioned telephones. Today, in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, with a population of approximately 110,000 persons has 55,000 active cellular telephones and 20,000 fixed telephones, a telecommunications penetration which is simply awesome. In 1981, there was nothing called internet access.

Our sub-region in 1981 was a dumping ground for sub-standard goods from overseas. It still is. But we are now, too, a dumping ground for the so-called “deportees” who left our sub-region as infants or pre-teens and learnt their criminal ways in the concrete jungles of New York, Chicago and Detroit. The United States of America, our dear friend and ally, quite unconscionably, exports their criminal creations to us, to our detriment. These “deportees” bring their highly sophisticated criminal skills as expert practitioners and, even more dangerously, as professors in crime who tutor many of our own impressionable young minds who too often are induced by the lumpen glamour from the inner cities of our northern neighbour or by the cultural imperialism of all-day, all-night cable television, under the guise of “choice” and “freedom”.

These imported criminals and home-grown vagabonds ply their drug trade for local, regional and international consumption. Increasingly, crime and violence threaten the very fabric of our civilised society. The cutlass and stone have been replaced as the criminal weapons of choice by the gun and the gun. It is imperative that all of civilised society across this region fight back against these barbarians. They must be given no space; the beatitudes are not for them.

All of these changes, and more, from 1981 onwards, demand, among other things, a more cohesive, coordinated and integrative response from the OECS. Any response which is "ad hoc", episodic or half-hearted will not do. It is impossible to tackle the contemporary challenges of economic development and international trade in the OECS member-states without a deeper union. Crime and the movement of criminals cannot be tackled effectively by the individual nation-states or by mere perfunctory cooperation.

The same applies to issues as diverse, but weighty, as disaster management and HIV/AIDS. Hurricane Ivan taught us last October that the ravages of nature recognise no national boundaries. Ivan underscores our essential unity; and its devastation of Grenada underlines the critical importance of holding each other's hands in unity, Together Now! Our sub-region is among the most prone in the world to natural disasters. Our history of migration and our open tourist economies make the deadly HIV/AIDS a monumental challenge. A natural disaster can wipe out a modern functioning economy overnight; the HIV/AIDS pandemic can do so less swiftly, but ever so surely. These are two of most vital public policy concerns of these times and demand a wholly united effort. In 1981, HIV/AIDS existed not for us. Today, it is urgent.

If the case for a deeper or more perfect union is so compelling, why is it that we, as a people, are pussy-footing on the question? Please, do not take the easy way out and blame the leaders. I say to you with full conviction that all the current leaders are committed to a deepening of the union. Some of us clamour for a political union. But, to quote C.L.R. James from his classic **Black Jacobins**:

“..... Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make”. The leaders cannot divine a deeper union, including a political union, without the full support of an informed people. It is my considered view that the current leaders of the OECS are ahead of their respective populations on the issue of a deeper union, including a political union of some sort. The leadership challenge, in part, is to convince the people of the sub-region of the necessity and desirability of a much closer union.

I am satisfied that there is something mighty peculiar about “islandness”, that is, the sense of belonging to an island exclusively. Living on an island, surrounded, as per the definition by water, prompts us to look inwards at our landscape as the centre of the world’s existence, mistaken as this notion is. At the same time, the expanse of our seascape enjoins us to gaze outwards. This tension between the inward-look and the outward gaze is evident, too, in the island-nation called the United Kingdom. Its head says that its link with the European Union is necessary, desirable and inevitable, yet its heart-strings pull elsewhere. So, it goes to the European Union reluctantly, kicking and screaming. The same mindset is overwhelmingly in the OECS.

Accordingly, we in the OECS must break out of the chauvinism and island nationalism induced by this restrictive “islandness”. This sense of “islandness” has been bolstered by the status of being an independent nation-state. Three decades, or slightly less, of constitutional independence have caused the construction of systems of internal governance and the distribution of the spoils of office which solidify “islandness”. Island chauvinism and patronage combine to make separateness a powerful brake on integration. But it is all so hugely mythical in this modern, globalised, international political economy. It is a myth which makes much of the political discourse in these islands so maddeningly parochial and unreal. Even wise leaders sometimes become enveloped in this discourse of unreality. Some permit themselves to harbour the vanity that it is better to be a big fish in a small pond than an ordinary fish in a larger lake. For

my part, I say honestly to you, and in paraphrasing the gospel singer: ***“In quest of a deeper union, I will surrender all.”***

The OECS must begin to assert its huge qualities. To be sure we have weaknesses and limitations, but we possess enormous strengths and possibilities. Our record of achievements is more than solid. Those, including some in the larger CARICOM, who look down on us contemptuously as failing banana states on the way to becoming marijuana-producing nations ought to be put straight. We must not permit such persons to traduce us or to use us as convenient scapegoats or as battering rams for their own purposes. We in the OECS are a people of dignity, merit and worth.

Of the three Nobel Prize Winners in the Caribbean, two are from the OECS, from St. Lucia. The youths in our sub-region are soaring to higher heights in every field of human endeavour. Let them so fly, like eagles, with their wings unclipped. From my country, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, there is the outstanding Kamal Wood who came out on top in the CXC Examinations last year in the whole region – first place out of some 150,000 who sat the exams. There is 18-year old Kiokya Cruickshank who won the regional Digicel Rising Star Singing Competition. Internationally, St. Vincent and the Grenadines' Kevin Lyttle is “turning us on” at the top of the Billboard Charts. And there are many more like these talented, achieving youngsters in my country and in every other OECS member-state in a range of activities. So, please, let me not hear the harping negatives, day-in, day-out, about our people. And those, including some in this region in high places who do not really know us, should refrain from traducing us from their perches of ignorance. The OECS time has come.

The OECS is the tightest, most closely-knitted of the integration efforts in the Caribbean. It is the innermost of the concentric circles of integration in the region. The integrity of each such circle is maintained without undermining any other. The points of contact and relevance at which they interface with each other assist in sustaining each. In practical terms, the immediate connections

between the OECS member-states and those in the wider CARICOM grouping are of significance, especially as the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) unfolds. A most important document, marked "Restricted" and which addresses this issue, is before us at this meeting. It is entitled **CSME: Findings of an Empirical Study on the Benefits for OECS Countries**. It makes for sobering reading by the leaders of the OECS. It is not a treatise for the unhinging of the OECS from CARICOM; the question is not whether to integrate, but rather how the OECS ought to integrate in the wider CARICOM.

Undoubtedly, unless the "special and differential" treatment for less developed countries in CARICOM, including those from the OECS, are fully elaborated in practice, the CSME will hardly get off the ground or be even still-born. But we want the CSME to succeed as a vehicle for socio-economic development.

So, we must address carefully matters relating to the Development Fund under Article 158 of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas in a manner to advance the interests of OECS member states. Further, there is a need to ensure that our "specific and differential" status on trade matters be given practical effect. The so-called MDC^s in CARICOM cannot deny us what they seek in a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The issue of freedom of movement is required to be sensitively pursued to our advantage. And we must insist that our highly sophisticated Regional Stock Exchange in the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union be adopted, and adapted, as the Regional Stock Exchange for the whole region. If such an Exchange existed in one of the so-called MDC^s there would have been little or no argument about its centrality for the regional enterprise. The OECS must put up no longer with the benign neglect or condescension by others in this region and elsewhere. We are reliable and worthwhile partners, always. But each of us, individually and collectively must live up to, and honour, the obligations placed upon us.

Given the uncertainties in CARICOM arising from anti-integration sentiments expressed in some powerful quarters in one or two of the so-called "more-

developed" CARICOM member-states, it is imperative that the OECS deepens its own systems of integration and establish arrangements with Trinidad and Tobago which go beyond the limits of the single market in CARICOM.

But the sustainability of the OECS itself is undermined when member-states treat cavalierly its obligations, including those related to the financing of the OECS Secretariat and its programmes. This issue is again before us at this meeting. Similarly, we must take some firm decisions, and follow-through on them, regarding external trade negotiations, agriculture, tourism, civil aviation, the judicial system, telecommunications, security, air transport, environmental matters, HIV/AIDS, and the OECS relations with the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago, and Puerto Rico.

Most of all, we must make further progress at this meeting on the establishment of an economic union in the OECS and the corresponding governance changes so as to more perfect our union. Learned helplessness and pessimism will serve us ill. The option is for an enhancement of our political virtue, not in an abstract sense, but in terms of our individual and collective self-mastery. We come from yesterday with our limiting burdens; let us turn to the world of tomorrow with our considerable strengths. And they are many. Our master poet from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Shake Keane, provides a fitting inspiration in his poem entitled "**Private Prayer**" written in 1973 for the late Walter Rodney at the time of the publication of Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa:

"To understand
How the whole thing run
I have to ask my parents
And even my daughter and son

"To understand the form
Of compromise I am
I must in my own voice ask

How the whole thing run

“To ask
Why I don’t dream
In the language I live in
I must rise up
Among syllables of my parents
In the land which I am

And from
A whole daughter a whole son
Out of the compromise
Which I am

“To understand history
I have to come home”

Let us all truly come home to the OECS. Of all historical time, only the future is ours to desecrate. The present is the past, and the past our fathers' mischief.

Thank you!