

Feature address, Brown's Town Community College Graduation and Awards Ceremony

June 30, 1999

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I want to begin by saluting each and every member of the graduating classes and in particular those of you who have received awards: the two groups Circle K and Tourism Year III, Fiona, Hirpha, Sherine, Omar and Sonjay, Camille, Sherine, Nordia, Makeba, Evon, Andrea, and most especially Charleen!

Well done, all of you! You have won recognition for yourselves by your disciplined dedication to excellence and no doubt too, for the strength of your own personal character. You must feel great pride in your awards, and justly so.

In the years to come you will look back on this day and relive the glow that you feel at this time. There may be other occasions in your life to come when you receive awards of some kind or another. But this one is very special.

I still remember that day nearly 40 years ago when I received one of the most coveted prizes at my last Prizegiving at my High School, Calabar High. And more recently I can remember your own Principal, Mr Walsh, when he was selected by his fellow Students to give the Valedictorian Address at our own Graduation Dinner at the Consortium Graduate School, just a few years ago. He gave a brilliant address. He had us all in stitches of laughter.

As you savour your feelings of pride, remember those who helped you along the way. Your parents and families; your teachers; your friends. Honour them and give them credit.

You may not know how much a word of appreciation means to a parent, a teacher or a friend. "Charleen I'm so proud of you!". "Yes Mom but I couldn't have done it without you". "Hirpha you mean you really got the award?" "Yes and I still remember the help you gave me on the project". "Evon, congratulations". "Thanks, teacher, but to be honest it should be shared with you". Even if it isn't always 100% true! Mr Walsh didn't tell me that, but I knew he was thinking it!

Giving credit to others doesn't take anything away from your own accomplishments. It allows others to share in your pride and encourages them to continue their support not only to you but also to those who follow in your footsteps. It enriches them without making you any poorer.

That's the easy part. The harder part is living up to the standards that you have learned to set for yourselves in this institution. And this applies to the whole graduating class.

This part is the part that says: how can I ensure that in 10, 20 and 30 years time my parents, my teachers and my friends will feel the same pride in me as they feel today?

Allow me to make a suggestion to all of you. Make a resolution today for what you aim to accomplish over the next 5 years. Fix certain targets for yourself for the year 2004. Write them down in a letter to yourself and put in a safe place.

Open this letter every year on the anniversary of Graduation Day. Make a note of what progress you have achieved. Make adjustments if you consider this necessary. Assess your progress by reference to goals you set for yourself on this special day in your life.

The kind of goals that I speak of are not the acquisition of money, of a prestigious job, or of personal power.

I am thinking of additional education, better skills and stronger character. Of leadership in organisations and in your community. Of contribution to to the betterment of others in your family, in your community and in your society.

Of a reputation for integrity, hard and disciplined work, honesty and consideration for others. Of responsible parenthood. Of learning to resolve disputes in a peaceful and amicable manner. Of decent citizenship.

I am thinking of characteristics and track record that will continue to bring honour to your college and pride to your parents, your family, your teachers and your friends in the years to come.

Look around Jamaica. The news is full of stories of high-profile people who put money before character.

Yesterday these people were lionised as successful businessmen who had made millions of dollars in very little time having started from humble beginnings. Today they are hated by depositors, hunted in the courts and hiding in remote places.

Their parents are ashamed of them. Their teachers say, "Did he really attend this School? I hardly remember him, it was such a short time that he was here. He is really a graduate of another school."

Many if not most of them were bright students at school. Some probably won awards. But they used their ability to further their own advancement at the expense of others. They forgot some basic rules that old-time people used to preach.

Like:

- Don't be greedy.
- Nothing in life worth having comes too easily or too quickly.
- Don't take short cuts, especially with other people's money.
- Don't borrow unless you can pay back.
- Don't live above your means. You don't need to impress other people or to try and prove something to yourself.
- Every mickle mek a muckle.

In other words, graduates, remember that there are more important things in life than "crissers" and "bimmers" and the Bold and the Beautiful.

There is nothing wrong with making money. We need businesspeople who are honest and efficient and productive. I hope that many of you will go on to become successful businessmen and women.

It is the way you make money, and what you do with it, that you have to watch.

At the end of the day it is not the money you have made, but the difference you have made, that matters.

You come from a great parish: the parish that produced two great Jamaicans—The Rt Ex Marcus Mosiah Garvey and the Hon Robert Nesta Marley. These men put their stamp on Jamaica and on the whole world.

Marcus Garvey was criticised and reviled in his time, but today he is proclaimed a National Hero. Garvey said "I want our people to think for themselves". Against overwhelming odds, he changed forever the way people of the African diaspora think about themselves, and are thought of others.

As you leave this institution, do not leave the habit of thinking for yourselves.

Everywhere in the world people know about Bob Marley. Bob sang "Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights".

Never allow your rights to be trampled on.

Echoing Marcus Garvey, he sang "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery". Do not become the unwitting tools of your own oppression. Look behind the cable TV and the music videos and ask yourselves: what is the message? Am I being manipulated?

You come from an institution that is on the way to becoming great. Next year the Brown's Town Community College celebrates its 25th anniversary. It is fitting that it should reach this milestone in what has come to be regarded as Millennium Year. In its short life, the College has established a reputation for service to community.

It has full-time and part time programmes in a wide variety of academic and practical subjects. It has opened a second campus in St Ann's Bay to make it for the students from the coast. Its Social Outreach Programme will by next year involve every single student.

This programme is a model for tertiary institutions the length and breadth of Jamaica. I commend your Principal and his dedicated staff and the support of the Ministry of Education.

You come from a country that has the potential to be great. Unfortunately that potential has yet to be made good. Our problems are well-known.

Looking only on economic front: it is fact that there has been no significant growth in our economy for the past 25 years. The average level of living in Jamaica at the end of the 1990s is hardly any better than it was at the beginning of the 1970s. A whole generation has grown up in an economy that has not grown.

The national rate of unemployment for young people with four or more years secondary education is 53 percent in the 15-19 age group and 67 percent in the 20-24 age group. This is the group to which most of you belong.

A recent newspaper report tells us that there are 123,000 unemployed persons in the 14-29 age group in Jamaica and 70 percent of these are without suitable job qualifications even though they attended secondary school. This is a chilling statistic.

So you are relatively fortunate to have had the opportunity to acquire qualifications at this College and this should be further motivation to make good use of the opportunity.

Our government is saddled by a huge burden of debt. For every dollar spent on education six dollars are spent paying the public debt, that is, interest and repayment of loans.

For every dollar spent on health over fifteen dollars are spent on the debt.

For every dollar spent on security over 10 dollars are spent on the debt.

The servicing of the debt is 3 times more than education, health and national security combined.

The public debt is crippling the ability of the government to provide decent education, decent health care, and adequate security for all the citizens.

How did we get to this point? It did not happen overnight. The public debt has been accumulating for the past 25 years. It has increased steadily through administrations of both political parties in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

It may be comforting to blame successive governments for the debt. But these governments were elected by us. They were formed by political parties made in Jamaica and based in Jamaica. If we blame government and politics, we have to look to ourselves.

So we have to look deeper. Perhaps collectively as a nation we forgot some of the basic principles that I was talking about earlier.

- Like making sacrifices for today in order to have a better tomorrow.
- Like getting our priorities right—for example, putting education first.
- Like not living above our means.
- Like not borrowing to finance current consumption, only for investment that increases the ability to produce and to repay.
- Like saying “If I can’t afford it, I will do without it”.
- Like coming clean with people about the financial condition of the country.
- Like not following foreign ideological fashions such as liberalisation and deregulation when the country is not yet ready.
- Like thinking for ourselves where economic policies are concerned.

Perhaps too we never learnt to work together as a national community. A community is a group of people sharing a common space and common interests, and who work together to achieve common objectives. I would like to believe that this institution is not just a Community College but a community of teachers, workers and students working together in the service of the wider community of which it is a part.

I can think of no country that has made great strides since its Independence that does not have a strong sense of national community, where different social groups agree to subordinate their selfish interests for the common good.

A young student walked into my office at the University the other day to talk about her research on Jamaica since Independence. I told her about the great promise and expectations for Jamaica that I and my friends, as young students like her, had felt at the time of Independence back in 1962. It turned out that this was in marked contrast to the sense of hopelessness and cynicism felt by her generation, your generation. She blurted out a question: “Prof. Girvan, what went wrong with Jamaica after Independence?”

Her question hit me like a blow. I felt that it was directed not just at me but at my entire generation. That what she was really asking was “how did your generation manage to make such a mess of Independence? Aren’t you ashamed of the legacy you have given us?”

I tried to answer her question as honestly as I could. I told her I would summarise the reasons as four “isms” that I call:

- “Classism”
- “Colourism”
- Political tribalism and

- “short-termism”.

Let me explain.

Classism and colourism are what lead to some people feeling that they are better than others because of how they look, or what school they went to, or where they live, or how they speak, or how much money they have. They divide Jamaicans into a different groups that resent, distrust and fear one another, or simply do not understand one another and cannot engage in social co-operation.

Political tribalism divides poor Jamaicans into warring tribes engaged in a constant battle over scarce benefits. When I am in power I favour my people and when you are in power you throw my people out and put your people in. My victimisation becomes the justification for your victimisation, and the cycle continues.

Long term planning and development become impossible, because policies do not carry over from one administration to another and because when I am in Opposition I feel obliged to attack what you are doing even if it is for the good of the country.

And finally, short-termism. This is the mentality that says “get it now” and don’t think about the consequences because somehow tomorrow will take care of itself. Often it means that someone else will have the problem to take care of tomorrow.

So borrow today and don’t worry about capacity to repay tomorrow. Sacrifice education now and worry about the long-term consequences.

Right here in the Caribbean little Barbados has put us to shame. Thirty years ago Jamaica’s average income per person was INSERT than Barbados’. Today Barbados’s average income per person is 3.5 times Jamaica’s.

Barbados is first among developing countries in the level of Human Development, a measure of income, education, and health. It is 29th in the world as a whole in Human Development. Jamaica ranks far behind, 84th in a total of 147 countries.

Why has Barbados done so well while we have done so badly? Those who have studied Barbados have pointed to two things. One is that Barbados has always invested a great deal of resources in educating its people.

Barbados spends four times as much in per capita terms on education than Jamaica. The proportion of its national budget devoted to education is 19 percent, Jamaica’s is 11 percent.

The adult literacy rate in Barbados 97.6 percent, in Jamaica it is 85.5 percent.

The combined education enrollment ratio in Barbados—primary, econdary and tertiary—is 80 percent of the population in the relevant age cohort. In Jamaica it is 63 percent.

In Barbados practically all school teachers in the primary system are trained teachers. In Jamaica it is 80 percent.

In Jamaica only 16 percent of the teachers are University graduates and as part of this 13 percent are trained University graduates.

Barbadians have also learnt to work together for the common good. It is called social co-operation and social cohesion.

They have two principal political parties, like we do, who take turns in governing. But the two parties engage in reasonably civilised discourse. They do not engage in vitriolic abuse or make war on one another.

When they are in government they build on the achievements of the previous administration, not seek to tear them down.

Black Barbadians and white Barbadians have learnt to live together in relative harmony. They resolve their differences through debate, negotiation and legislation, without resorting to threats and violence. They understand that they all share a small, densely populated island and that if they do not co-operate then everybody will be the loser.

Can we in Jamaica not learn to work together as a national community? Just last week there was reference to a report of serious deficiencies among Primary School children, especially in English and Mathematics. The Report concluded that “The low functional literacy and numeracy levels of Grade 6 students make them ill-equipped to operate at the Grade 7 level”.

In plain English this means that a high proportion of primary school leavers are functionally illiterate and innumerate and are incapable of taking proper advantage of secondary education.

Is it any wonder that there are so many unemployed school-leavers and that the majority of them are without suitable qualifications?

Are we as a society so divided that Jamaicans of different political persuasions and social and economic backgrounds cannot agree on a programme, with adequate resources, to equip every single Jamaican child with adequate literacy and numeracy and computer skills?

To use such a programme as the foundation for a 20-year year plan for human resource development to propel Jamaica into the 21st century?

The resources devoted to education from the national budget could be doubled with just one-quarter of the amount being spent to service the internal debt of the Government. If

all of the extra amount were used for primary and secondary education the increase would be over 160 percent.

Please let us not hear that this is “not feasible” and “we cannot afford it”. Quite simply, it is a matter of where our priorities lie. One thing I sincerely believe is that if we do not address the deficiencies in primary and secondary education, and decide as a society to find the resources and make the sacrifices to make it happen then we will be condemning our people to a future of poverty and despair and our society will continue to disintegrate.

Those who own the wealth in this society will find that their wealth will count for nothing. And as for the “new millennium”, “globalisation”, “competitiveness” and these other things, you can forget about them.

I would like to think that it is feasible. I would like to think that there is a silent majority who would welcome the opportunity to work together on such a plan, and in other areas of social and economic strategy, so that there is a brighter future within Jamaica for their children and grandchildren and for young people like you.

I would like to think that you and many others of your generation are part of that silent majority.

I would like to believe that the silent majority of Jamaicans are fed up with the constant fussing and fighting, the violence, and the indiscipline. Fed up with no one taking responsibility for their actions and for the future of the country. Fed up with classism, colourism, political tribalism and short-termism.

I would like to think that you, as part of this silent majority, will become more and more vocal about these issues and will use whatever opportunities are available to you help this country get its priorities right.

The road before you will not be easy. Many of you will not find a job at once. Do not despair. Keep looking. Keep studying. Use your spare time to do something constructive for yourself, your family or your community.

You may even think of setting up your own small business, perhaps joining together with one of two of your friends, pooling your savings, your skills, and your resources. Remember that the critical ingredients of success in a co-operative business are honesty and trust.

You may want to move from where you are staying but accommodation is a problem. Be patient.

You may have debts to repay. Your income will not be adequate for everything you want to do. It never is. Do not be tempted to take short cuts, to be foolhardy, or to be dishonest.

Above all, be confident. There have been difficult times in Jamaica before, but our people have survived by drawing on their own resourcefulness and ingenuity and by co-operating with one another.

Remember the words of Marcus Garvey: “If you have no confidence in yourself you are twice defeated in the race of life”.

I know that the graduates of BTCC will not be defeated in the race of life.

One Love.