

ADDRESS

THE VIEW FROM THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

By Havelock R. Brewster

On the Occasion of the Presentation of Graduates Ceremony, University of
the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, November 7, 2008

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Pro-Chancellors, Campus Principal, Campus Registrar, Chair of the Mona Campus Council, Deans of Faculties, Emeritus Vice Chancellor, Graduates, Parents and Guardians, Special Guests, the Custos of Kingston, Rev. the Hon. Canon Weevil Gordon and Mrs. Gordon, Hon. Ministers of Government, Distinguished Guests.

Good Afternoon.

I acknowledge , with my deepest gratitude, the great honour the University of the West Indies has bestowed upon me of the conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Laws Honoris Causa.

My thanks are extended as well to the Honourable Public Orator of the University who has made me all look so very impressive- way beyond what I justly deserve.

It must have taken much courage for the University to decide to confer this honour on me, who, as a young lecturer was threatened with firing for what is now known as politically incorrect behavior, and who over the years has not figured on Caribbean governments lists of persona grata.

It is my duty too to offer words of exhortation to the graduating class. However, I do not wish to indulge in any ex cathedra inspirational. But rather I want to look back and then forward, commenting on memorable episodes over these last forty years, and to leave it to you graduates to draw out your own personal exhortations.

When I arrived on this campus just over forty years ago as a young economics lecturer, the big challenge the community and governments offered the University was to make itself, in its research and teaching, advice and practice, useful and relevant to the real and pressing needs of our Caribbean community. Our Chancellor echoes the feeling of that time in his introduction to the UWI's Pelican's "60 under 60" when he says : "The stature of our legacy will be determined by our ability to become the first port of call for regional leadership seeking advice and technical expertise for policy development, strategic planning and program implementation.....".

In the economics and social studies faculty, as in other faculties, we took up the challenge, and came up with a number of conclusions and recommendations. They included the need to: orient public policy to the eradication of persistent poverty, and the roots of the plantation system; to lessen dependence on primary commodities, like sugar, and bananas, exported under preferential terms; to get greater returns and added-value out of our raw materials and services, like bauxite, petroleum, timber, fishery

products, and tourism; to diversify the production structure ; to rationalize our air and maritime transport; to combine our natural resources and aggregate demand through integrated policies for production and trade; to promote local ownership of Caribbean assets.

You would think this is all pretty respectable stuff, such as comes out of the World Bank these days. But all this was greeted forty years ago, not as the “first port of call for regional leadership”, but with unprecedented hostility. The authors were hounded as communists, Marxists revolutionaries, conspirators with Fidel Castro, at best lunatics. The would-be reformers had passports seized, some expelled from the country, fired, threatened, and one assassinated.

Let me fast forward forty years exactly to the present day. To the contemporary issue of fundamentally re-shaping our relations with the old colonial powers of Western Europe, now codified, they say, for all time, in a so-called Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union. This Agreement has been severely criticized in the Caribbean, in Europe itself, and internationally, by a wide spectrum of society for the unfair and exploitive terms it has imposed on us. Indeed, in a report of the European Parliament itself, issued only a few days ago, it is stated: “Instead of forcing these countries to negotiate with a gun to their heads, the European Commission should have come forward with alternative proposals.”

Whatever be the political viewpoints and interests of the CARICOM parties to the Agreement, and their individual understanding of its provisions, this much must be clear and common to most observers. That:-

- the Agreement focuses on market access, and marginalizes support for development that was supposed, promised, and expected to be the centre-piece of our new relationship with Europe;
- reciprocity, in the form of the full and free access to our markets for goods, services, and investment, that we have been forced to give to Europe, is fundamentally unjust, and dishonest, among partners who are so vastly unequal;
- we have given Europe valuable concessions in trade, services and investment, in exchange for uncertain or non-existent prospects of exporting to their markets;
- our discretion to promote development according to our own policies, objectives and priorities has been qualified in significant respects; and
- we have permitted our own plans for deepening integration in the CARICOM Single Market and Economy to be pre-empted, to be subordinated, to the requirements of Europe.

As in the earlier event, forty years ago, the advocates of change have been greeted, again, not “as the first port of call for regional leadership’, but with harassment, at the port of entry and in other ways, including a barrage of public vituperation of the most personal and offensive kind. We have had the spectacle of a Prime Minister, a graduate of this University, vilifying as mendicants those who hold other views, including a fellow Head of State; of editors of hitherto respected newspapers descending to the depths of personal abuse of dissenting individuals, impugning their loyalty, integrity

and qualifications, including of professors who served this and other universities and international institutions with high distinction; mocking one of the most eminent Caribbean Statesmen, a long-serving Commonwealth Secretary General, a Chancellor of this University for many years, and of other Universities, the recipient of Honorary Doctorates from twenty-five Universities all over the world, as seeking the “glare of public visibility for personal, pernicious and morally-elastic purposes”. And we have also seen the shameful dissemination of false information, and the withholding of information, by responsible officials of the European Commission.

There is much that is common to these two events, separated though they may be by forty years. But what I want to point to tonight is ideological dogmatism and the fear of change. In the earlier event, the comfort zone of colonialism was being disturbed. In the present episode, the chastening realization that the free market, such as the Agreement represents, is no more efficient, no more growth-producing, no better managed, and no less corrupt than management by the State; that, the interest of all, a reasonable accommodation is needed between private enterprise and public responsibility; and that, once again, we are hitching our wagon to the collapsing stars of the economic universe.

This great University has fostered over the years a milieu of intellectual curiosity, questioning, dissent, and creative thinking and practice. Out of that environment has come no less than eight Prime Ministers of Caribbean Community States, and numerous Cabinet Ministers, Secretaries-General of the Caribbean Community, and Chief Executives of Agencies and

Corporations. And so some of my generation have been asking ourselves how have we come to the present state of dogmatism and fear of change—now being presented as globalization/modernization and pragmatism. I do not have all the answers. But I believe we were probably too naïve: to have placed so much faith in principle and rationalism.

These days all over the so-called democratic world, greed and power seem to trump service and consensus. These failings must surely be due, in a good measure, to the political system we have inherited, and continue to work, as if divinely ordained. It is the system where the winner of fifty-one percent of the votes cast, frequently a minority of the electorate itself, “takes all”. In our region this can and often does leave substantial portions, even a majority, of the population, with literally no voice at all. A system otherwise called “democracy”. The rules of this system may be the only practically workable ones in large countries, of tens and hundreds of millions of people. In micro-States like ours, numbered in the tens of thousands of people, just a few square miles of area, better can surely be done. A participatory democracy should be a feasible and realistic system of governance in these States.

I believe it could better inculcate the habits of popular consultation, and civil behavior in respect of dissent; of service to community and humility, in place of the contempt and pomposity that so quickly set in following the results of general elections. It could encourage the practice of syncretism and accommodation; and promote a stronger commitment to transparency and honesty. In sum, I believe it could help to raise the premium on service and consensus-building.

Unrealistic? If Switzerland, a country of six million people, can do it, why can't we. It is a great task for a new, young generation of thinkers and pragmatists—to craft the means for so doing, and to stimulate the will and courage to change. Why not seize the advantages of small size in governance, even as we strive for the benefits of larger scale in economic operation? My generation, I believe, managed to make a significant advance in creating a Caribbean Economic Community. Why not set our sights now on creating a functioning, participatory Caribbean Democracy?

In preparing for this event, I read somewhere that a high University authority – not in the Caribbean- said that after listening to these graduation exercises for decades, not a single message of significance could he recall. Maybe this is the fate of all speakers at these events. You may have, as I invited you to do, come up with one or two private exhortations of your own, as I spoke. But, as you leave for home, I would like to open and read a message that I have received from you. It is again from the Pelican's "60 under 60" by Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine. She says: "it is my belief that as Caribbean people, we do not always have to follow. We can lead, be original, pioneering and the best in the world in what we do." So my dear graduates, I depart leaving this thought: "Beware, beware, as you steer ahead, of keeping your eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror".

Thank you and good evening.