

Caribbean Diplomatic Training Programme for Mid-Career Diplomats

CARIBBEAN DIPLOMACY

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I want to begin by congratulating the CARICOM Secretariat on the mounting of this Workshop. It is no secret that I place great store by the role of Caribbean diplomacy over nearly fifty years of engagement with the international community. Some of our most notable achievements have been in this field – at the United Nations, in the Non-aligned Movement, in the Commonwealth, in Brussels and in Geneva, in the ACP and at the OAS – and always on the right side of history! You are heirs to a great tradition. It will be your challenge to enhance it. Some of the challenges will be no different to those we have faced in the past and still face today.

If I had the choice I would have made the title of these remarks a question: *WHY FOREIGN AFFAIRS?*; and I might have continued: *WHY FOREIGN POLICY? WHY CARIBBEAN DIPLOMACY? WHY CARIBBEAN DIPLOMATS?* I have absolutely no doubt about the answers to these questions; nor, I expect, have you. But far too many people have; too many are unsure; too many harbour negative thoughts. And among them from place to place, from time to time, are decision makers whose responses bear on the nature, the content, sometimes the very reality of

Caribbean diplomacy. Our discussions here are abstractions unless we answer these questions and establish positive Caribbean paradigms within which to pursue them.

I once had to address these questions directly. I was Guyana's first functional Foreign Minister. It was my responsibility to create Guyana's fledgling Foreign Service and initiate development of Guyana's Foreign Policy. I had to convince myself of the importance of these tasks before I could even try to inspire others to help me in fulfilling them. It was not difficult for me; for, by 1966 (the year of our Independence) I had already lived a regional life throughout the worthily conceived 'federal' project, and at home concern with the integrity of Guyana's borders had compelled an international engagement. However, the question *Why Caribbean Diplomacy?* was not as self-evidently answered everywhere; more often than not it was simply an unquestioned assumption that it was a necessary incident of Independence: after all, at the constitutional level, Independence itself was essentially the relinquishment by the imperial power of its residual authority and responsibility for 'defence' and 'foreign affairs'.

Throughout the Caribbean, first with Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago and later with Guyana and Barbados a basic preparation for independence was the identification of young men and women who would be among the country's first diplomats and who were assigned to British Embassies around the world on a kind of apprenticeship system. It had begun earlier with young men and women who would have been the first diplomats of the independent West Indies. Most of them would become members of their country's fledgling Foreign Service; some would rise in those Services to eventually become Ambassadors. Like the Flag and the Anthem and membership of the UN, Foreign Affairs came with Independence; it was part of the package, Apart from the special cases of Guyana and Belize who inherited frontier problems, Caribbean diplomacy was initially regarded as largely cosmetic. We had joined 'the Joneses'.

For the greater part, that is how the man in the street regarded foreign affairs; and it had a cramping effect on the development of Caribbean diplomacy and the structures appurtenant to it – from Ministries to Missions. Foreign Missions were expensive and earned no votes; Foreign Ministers were the easiest targets. A fellow Foreign Minister, Dudley Thompson, (I suspect wanting to deflect attention from his own record) once asked a regional meeting if they knew the difference between Sonny Ramphal and God, and explained it himself by saying that 'God was everywhere, whereas Sonny was everywhere except Georgetown'. The story was later to be repeated in Jamaica with him as the target. There were serious sceptics even in political directorates – particularly among new Ministers without any experience whatever beyond local shores. Fortunately, this seldom included Presidents and Prime Ministers. Caribbean diplomacy developed against a backdrop of needing to prove its worth and even today, coming up to a half century since it began with Jamaica's Independence in 1962, it still needs to do so. That is part of your challenge as its custodians.

The basic scepticism of 'foreign affairs' was bolstered within Governments by two particular developments: the establishment of Foreign Missions in Regional Capitals and the rise of Summitry as a feature of international life.

The establishment of Foreign Missions gave Caribbean leaders and senior bureaucrats direct interaction with Foreign Government representatives and seemed to some to weaken the case for

our own presences abroad – particularly in those Capitals represented in the Region.. In fact, the very opposite was true; only the Foreign Country benefited from this one way diplomacy. We had no direct reporting from abroad and no ongoing capacity to put our case at ministerial and departmental level – the later being particularly crucial. What is undoubted is the need to be minimalist in the choice of Capitals in which we would have Missions, and having done so to be effective on the ground. The latter should be self-evident; but not infrequently, we are not as effective as we should be.

The principal reason for this rests in the choice of head of Mission – the Ambassador. Of course there are and always have been outstanding Caribbean Ambassadors (and High Commissioners). In London, in Washington, in New York (at the UN), in Brussels and Geneva and other Capitals; and they are often spoken of with real professional respect – but usually with undertones of nostalgia for their quality again. The truth is that the quality of our most senior representatives is very uneven. This is often the case where political, not professional, considerations have influenced their choice. This is a problem not confined to the Caribbean; but when big countries flounder in the same way, their Missions are usually strong enough to retrieve the situation.

I remember having to make this point many years ago as Guyana's Foreign Minister to the largest country in our Hemisphere. During Nelson Rockefeller's visit to Latin America as President Nixon's special envoy, he had a stock question which he put at the end of his discussion: *If there is one recommendation you would like to see me make to the President, what would it be?* I suspect he expected an answer to do with projects or resources or Hemispheric policy. I said instead: *Send us a career Ambassador. He or she interprets us to you and you to us. There is no more important function in our relations. If we get it right, everything else would benefit; if wrong, nothing would be right*'. He was good enough to say that he understood and sympathised. I suspect he had encountered on his journey some of the wrong choices that Washington had made in the Hemisphere as political payoffs. As I said, a big country can moderate the effects of a bad choice; a small country cannot. We in the Caribbean cannot. Our national interest suffers irremediably.

As important as our choice of diplomats, is the capacity of the Foreign Ministry to support them and to service the government at home. This means both numbers and professional quality. As the Jamaicans say, *everything is everything*,, It is all one; you cannot build an effective Foreign Service save through recruiting to it the best intellectual talent of the country; and you cannot attract such talent unless you have a Foreign Service of high calibre. A well oiled Foreign Service means constant direction and coordination of our Foreign Missions from the Foreign Ministry. Diplomats cannot be sent abroad and left to improvise in foreign Capitals; all the more so when they themselves are sub-quality. That means support for the Foreign Minister from his or her colleagues is providing a fair share of resources and in a disciplined approach which allows the Ministry to be the focal point of all things that have a foreign affairs content. We are all guilty of malfeasance in all of these areas. It is not just the Foreign Ministry or the Foreign Service that suffers but the entire country.

The rise of 'summitry' brought obvious gains. Leaders interacting with each other can produce immediate results which years of diplomatic effort may have failed to achieve. At their best Summit meetings of leaders produce greater understanding of contending views – the essential

pre-condition of convergence; and where the chemistry between leaders is right the effects outlast the immediate Summit Meeting. The best example in my experience were Commonwealth summits which used to last upward of five days and really allowed leaders to understand each other – to get into each other’s heads, to understand where they were coming from and with what perceptions. Pierre Trudeau, the great Canadian Prime Minister of the 70s and early 80s once told me that if the only thing about the Commonwealth was the Summit every two years when he could interact intellectually with fellow Heads of Government, it would be worthwhile for Canada. I know that those Meetings influenced Canadian policy on ‘the Common Fund’ which was the great North-South issue of the early 80s. Similarly, Jimmy Carter’s private meetings with Michael Manley on the Common Fund during the Signing of the Panama Canal treaties led to a review of US policy. It did not in the end change American policy; but an edict went out at official level never again to allow Michael Manley to be alone with the President.

Such is the potential of summitry at its best. But there is a psychological downside in encouraging leaders of small countries to believe that this kind of occasional contact is a substitute for more patient systematic diplomatic work - that foreign affairs could be handled at the leadership level without the expense of foreign missions. That is a dangerously false conclusion. Fortunately, some larger developing countries – India, Brazil, Egypt, for example, have some of the most highly rated Foreign Services in the world.

More basically, why a Foreign Policy for our small countries? Is the Caribbean – and even more so its separate components – too miniscule a player on the international scene to dabble in foreign affairs or even think it necessary to have a ‘foreign policy’. Coming up to 50 years from independence (for some of us) such questions should be otiose and their answers self-evident. Yet such questions persist at many levels in our societies. In the Report of the West Indian Commission looking to the Caribbean in the 21st Century we felt it necessary to address these matters. We did so in Chapter XI – *Shaping External Relations*; I commend its contents to you. Towards the end of the Chapter is a passage I want to read to you for its continuing relevance to your life’s work. It was sub-titled *Windows on the World – Multiple Entry Points*, and is this: [at pp. 452/3 of the UWI Press edition of *TIME FOR ACTION*]:

As we develop the structures of unity responsive to the need to both deepen the CARICOM integration process and widen Caribbean regional integration, one matter of fundamental importance needs to be emphasised. The processes of deepening and widening we have described will preoccupy us; but it is not our intention, it is not our proposal, that they should be our exclusive pursuits. CARICOM’s structures of unity must not constitute a prison. They must have windows on the wider world and pathways that lead outward. West Indian Governments and people must consciously maximise every advantage and potential that history and geography have bequeathed us. It is a feature of that legacy that CARICOM has multiple entry points to the world. Those entry points may be more the result of cruel history than careful planning; but they are, in the result, a precious heritage.

As we have made clear ,we have entry point to Europe; to Africa and Asia; to Canada; to the United States; to the Commonwealth; to Latin America; the Lomé Convention; our cultural bedrock; our roles in the Non-Aligned Movement and whatever succeeds it in a

post-cold War world; CARIBCAN and our 'special relationship' with Canada; the CBI, the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative (EAI) and the potential of NAFTA; Commonwealth functional cooperation, including the CFTC AND Commonwealth political links; our work in the Latin American group at the UN and our membership of the OAS – are all elements of those multiple entry points. We must preserve them all, and consolidate them simultaneously with deepening CARICOM and developing our Association of Caribbean States.

The 'coordination of foreign policies is already one of the objectives of CARICOM as expressed in the Treaty of Chaguaramas and the Committee of Foreign Ministers has been one of the more purposeful arms of CARICOM. The CARICOM Commission which we are proposing will give this aspect of the Community's work added vigour – quite apart from the development of the Association of Caribbean States. It is one of the reasons why the 'external affairs' unit of the Secretariat might well be located close to the Commission's Headquarters.

Does more need to be said? The Caribbean desperately needs to be active and effective in very many areas of Foreign Policy as an adjunct to its national and regional policies – and it needs to be for reasons of survival. Foreign affairs is not 'keeping up with the Joneses'; it is acting to ensure that 'the Joneses' respect our right to survive in a world that is peaceful, just and habitable. As we know, however, the CARICOM Commission was never set up and the Committee of Foreign Ministers is more remembered for agreement on international candidatures (important as that is) than for foreign policy coordination.

Caribbean diplomacy clearly has two harmonised components: Diplomacy as separate states of course, but Diplomacy also as the collective (however you describe it) that it is. This diplomacy has distinct attributes that derive from the larger policy frameworks that the Region has established – and is constantly, but all too slowly, refining. Yet they are vital institutional arrangements to give effect to the agreed goals of the Caribbean Community. But whatever these arrangements may be, their functioning (like their establishment) will rely on a culture of regionalism – the development of a regional patriotism that enhances national identities. Caribbean diplomacy is inseparable from a Caribbean personality; it is a civilisational thing. We are still evolving the structures in which that regional diplomacy can flourish and through which it can find inspiration and direction. Ultimately, it must gain primacy over the smaller, narrower, 'insular' diplomacy as Caribbean unity deepens.

At this moment, that smaller, narrower, insular impulse is dominant. We are turning inward just at the moment when the external environment of crisis demands responses driven by the spirit of community. Not only are we not going forward in fulfilment of professed goals – like the CARICOM Single Market – we are actually retreating from both the spirit and letter of community agreements – like those that bear on the movement of Caribbean people. If we allow these negative instincts to prevail; we will lose altogether the reality of 'community' which is within our grasp; and endanger the Caribbean personality which should be its underpinning. They must not prevail.

The Caribbean needs the wider world, and it needs it for survival, and it needs it as a collective. Our enlightened interaction with that world - our 'foreign affairs' - is crucial. Your vocation makes you key strategisers and interlocutors with that world. You must never doubt the vital importance of your work to the future of the Region.

After a lifetime of roller-coaster rides towards Caribbean unity of purpose and action, I still personally believe that fate holds no other destiny for our Region than completing the journey together. Even in these threatening times I still believe that one day you may be members of a single Caribbean Foreign Service, or at least have the privilege of helping to construct it and shaping the regional policies that give it vitality. The best diplomats, regionally as nationally, are those who help creatively in the evolution of the policies they go on to pursue as worthy professionals.

At the level of external relations, we sometimes take refuge from consolidation in the virtue of numbers. But that matters only in voting and increasingly voting is giving way to consensus. Are 13 Caribbean voices more persuasive in foreign Chanceries or multilateral institutions than 1 Chinese or Indian or South African or Brazilian voice? Do 13 High Commissioners in London carry more weight in the British Foreign Office because of their number? They receive the courtesies due their diplomatic rank; but the attention due nonentities. This is not the fault of the diplomats; it is the inevitable result of the nonsense of separateness and an obsession with the trappings of sovereignty when its substance has long disappeared in our globalised world. Who is impressed when on Armistice day in London our 13 High Commissioners line up to lay separate wreaths for West Indians fallen in foreign wars; or when our 13 Ambassadors in Washington jostle to greet a new President making the point that they are separate from the other 12. It is these absurdities that bring 'foreign affairs' into disrepute with everyday West Indians who are far ahead of governments in their sense of oneness.

Yesterday, the Assistant Secretary General of the OAS, himself a Caricom citizen, said that 'CARICOM should revisit its strategic objectives, especially in the context of what is happening globally' [*Stabroek News*, 19.5.09 p.12]. I do not know precisely what he had in mind; but revisiting our strategic objectives is very necessary for I believe that they were sound and we are in danger of straying from them. As the Region's young diplomats you need the reassurance that those objectives are still our holy grail.

Seventeen years ago the West Indian Commission's Report *Time for Action* addressed the issue which has been raised by the DR's recent application for membership of CARICOM and dramatised in Ron Sanders' Commentary 'The Big Three and the Little Caribbean'. It is worth recalling what the West Indian Commission advised:

The West Indies must both deepen the process of integration to which it has set its hand and reach out to a wider Caribbean in appropriate levels of cooperation.[p.443]

The dual track approach may produce differing levels of integration within the Caribbean; it may produce circles of association that start with the intimate West Indian

family and others that encompass an extended family of the non-English speaking islands of the Caribbean, and a still larger circle of closer relations with countries of the Caribbean Basin that include territories of the South and Central American littoral.[p.444]

We are firmly of the view that the widening of CARICOM's relations into the entire Caribbean must be an essential part of the way forward. But we believe it would be a mistake to see that process of widening simply in terms of enlarging CARICOM's membership. There are important factors to be balanced. On the economic side, we have to feel our way in enlarging the CARICOM market so that we make progress in that direction without being overwhelmed by new members and end up being lost within our own widened Community.[p.445/6]

So, how do we widen? Our view is that CARICOM should remain the inner core of relationships in the Region, and that we should consciously create space beyond membership of CARICOM for CARICOM's integrationist relationships with Caribbean countries from Central America to Suriname, from Cuba to Venezuela.

I believe that advice remains relevant today when there is further talk of enlarged membership of CARICOM.

We must not forget how close we have come close to unitisation in the past and with what notable successes. We did so in negotiating the Lomé Convention in the 70s when 1 Ministerial voice spoke for not just the Caribbean but for Africa and Asia as well – and was louder because of that. In the EPA negotiations the Europeans ensured that that would never happen again – with disastrous results for all the ACP, including its once formidable unity.

In the 21st Century I am sure we will come back to our senses – out of necessity if not of inclination. A younger generation of diplomats – you - must come naturally to such a new regime of Caribbean Diplomacy; indeed, must help to inaugurate it.

Thank you.