

**FEATURE ADDRESS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION
BY THE
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF INDIAN CULTURE (NCIC)
OF THE 47th ANNIVERSARY OF
THE INDEPENDENCE OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO,
Divali Nagar Auditorium, Chaguanas, Saturday, August 29, 2009, 6.30 p.m.**

Opening remarks.

I thought I would say something this evening about the state of our Republic as we prepare to enter the 48th year of our political independence. It is no secret that our population, whatever the socio-economic or other status of its members, is on the whole unhappy, or at the very least uncomfortable, with the condition of Trinidad and Tobago. We have specific concerns about crime, or race, or the cost of living, or the health service, or the carnage on the roads, and so on. But driving all these concerns is one major factor among others: the tarnished quality of governance.

There is a considerable difference between *government* and *governance*. To simplify matters, I usually say that government is *what* you do, while governance is *how* you do it.

In Trinidad and Tobago, ladies and gentlemen, the structure of relationships between government and people has traditionally been very much a top-down affair. The centralist philosophy of the colonial whites was enthusiastically embraced by the non-whites who inherited the mantle, and belief in the correctness of this approach was fortified by what was happening in other parts of the decolonising world of the 1950s and 60s. If Eric Williams, a child of that political age, was authoritarian, it wasn't only because of his psyche – Nkrumah in Ghana, or Sukarno in Indonesia, or Sekou Toure in Guinea went much further than he. I say nothing of Forbes Burnham in Guyana.

The justification generally adduced for this autocratic course of action was that the energies of the state in the immediate post-colonial era should be urgently harnessed for the development of the state. Democracy was all well and good, but it caused too much time and effort to be wasted in debate and argument. It was much better to have a centralised system, with one overall leader, which could unify the population and act swiftly and decisively on its behalf. In many countries, the system *was* the leader.

As you are aware, this attitude still exists today – the conviction that the government knows best, that the voters have placed their faith in the government's ability and willingness to think and act for them, that the government must lead from the front, that the government's leader is all-seeing and all-knowing, and that serious consultation with the voters who put the government there in the first place is therefore unnecessary and, indeed, a sign of weakness.

Now I have to say that these beliefs are not peculiar to Trinidad and Tobago. Last year, for instance, the former British Foreign Secretary, David Owen, published a book titled “In sickness and in power”. A major thesis of the book is that political leaders often descend fairly quickly into the pit of *hubris*, the ancient Greek word for inordinate pride. (In Greek tragedy, by the way, *hubris* always led to *nemesis*. I don’t need to explain that one.)

Owen speaks among others about George Bush and Tony Blair, whose incompetence, he says, “was triggered by three characteristic symptoms of *hubris*: excessive self-confidence, restlessness and inattention to detail.” He goes on:

“A self-confidence that exclusively reserves decision-making to itself, does not seek advice and fails to listen to or is contemptuous of the wisdom of others, particularly if it conflicts with the leader’s own viewpoint, is hubristic. If this is combined with an energy that is restless for action and is ready to intervene on the basis of a loose sense of the broader picture rather than the detailed study of all the relevant information, then serious mistakes are almost inevitable.”

I don’t know if that description puts you in mind of anyone.

Since in any organisation the leader generally sets the tone, it is not surprising that the centralist philosophy to which I just referred becomes increasingly evident at the government level in concept, style and implementation. The philosophy is always couched in reasonable terms designed to lull you into agreement – “we’re doing this to make your life better” or “this will improve the administration of justice or the delivery of services”, and so on.

On closer examination, however, you observe a pattern, and you then realise that the real motive is greater control of the institutions of the state and a consequent enhancement of personal and political power. We see this in Trinidad and Tobago today in the proposals for what is cynically called “constitutional reform” or “local government reform”. These proposals are nothing of the sort. What they really are is an attempt to undermine true democracy, using a fig leaf of apparently democratic procedures which barely conceals a private anti-democratic agenda for constitutional dictatorship, which in turn would of course *deform* – not reform – good governance. You therefore see why vigilance and a willingness to speak out are so crucial, ladies and gentlemen.

The motor that drives the process to *hubris* is power, which in our societies largely derives from office. If you’re out of office, you want to get there. If you’re in office, you want to stay there. You use every stratagem, every means, every device – not necessarily short of illegality – to achieve your goal. And when you achieve it you often call yourself a “public servant”, not a politician, because you want to persuade all and sundry that you’re there only to serve them, not exploit them or serve yourself. I can only hope that Jennifer Baptiste-Primus has been sending out application forms for membership in the PSA.

But the continued possession and exercise of power, ladies and gentlemen, are usually at odds with good governance. You are certainly familiar with the words of Lord Acton, who said in 1887 that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Much more recently, Henry Kissinger described power as “the great aphrodisiac”. And you know what effect aphrodisiacs have.

As used by Lord Acton, corruption isn’t necessarily the diversion of public monies into private pockets. Reprehensible as that is, the corruption he was talking about is much more sinister. It is a distortion of ethics (what many call “morality”) with a view to the preservation and enhancement of personal and political primacy. It is a wholesale debasement of the principles by which a decent nation should constantly be guided.

One of our leading politicians has declared that politics has its own morality. Which leads me to ask what the word “morality” really means, because the statement, especially given the context in which it was made, strongly suggests that the practitioners of the profession of politics hold and apply standards of perception and behaviour very different from those practised by many, if not most, members of the societies those same practitioners are always so anxious to lead. That is worrying.

To achieve their objectives, politicians employ a variety of methods, many if not most of which fly in the face of good governance (and good government, too), and subvert the trust that ought to exist between leaders and the people.

One method is to avoid any lasting consistency of word or action – I shall for the time being refrain from using the word “lie”. This isn’t new anywhere in the world – more than 2,000 years ago the Greek philosopher Plato noted that rulers should “use falsehood in dealing with the citizenry or enemy for the good of the state.” You notice in that quotation that the citizens of the state are lumped together with the enemies of the state. You may find that familiar.

These days, when a rapidly growing number of us call for transparency, our leaders reply that for reasons of the public interest, or what Plato called “the good of the state” – usually national security or some form of inexplicable confidentiality like refusing to reveal the quantum of fees paid to attorneys, or the names and fields of study of scholarship holders – our leaders reply that they cannot tell us what we want and need to hear. And all the while they’re using, or misusing, *our* money. From Plato to Parnall, absolutely nothing has changed in this regard.

In an article last month in the UK newspaper The Independent, Andreas Whittam Smith cites Tony Blair as saying in 1987 that “the truth becomes almost impossible to communicate because total frankness, relayed in the shorthand of the news media, becomes simply a weapon in the hands of opponents.” Whittam Smith drily notes: “In other words, you daren’t tell the truth because it will be used against you.”

And if you think that masses bused in for political party meetings are a purely local phenomenon, Whittam Smith tells us that the flag-waving crowds at Blair's arrival in Downing St. following his first election victory in 1997 "were party workers brought in especially for the purpose of scene setting."

But I am kinder than Whittam Smith, ladies and gentlemen. He says that politicians are deceitful and dishonest. For my part, I say that politicians are not like that at all. Politicians do not lie. What they do is constantly discover new truths, or rearrange old ones. If the truth of five minutes ago appears to contradict the one of ten minutes ago, that is simply illusion. A new set of circumstances has presented itself, and it must be dealt with accordingly.

In a multiracial, multireligious, multicultural society such as ours, politicians use another method to achieve the objective of power: they divide by race and religion, while swearing blind that they are doing everything they can to bring about unity. Within the last several weeks we have for instance been hearing charges of what is called "ethnic cleansing" coming from both sides of the main racial divide. These charges have merely served to rally forces and harden opinions on each side against the other, to the detriment of the country, and efforts to explain that what was said wasn't really what was meant have been little short of pathetic.

But that isn't all that is done to keep us separated; code words and phrases and actions are also ingeniously employed. When a leading politician declares publicly, and without any provocation whatsoever, that he is "a child of God", a message is being sent, and received. When a Bible is conspicuously displayed in Parliament while someone with whom you disagree is speaking, a message is being sent, and received. When names are read out in public, and the comment then made that none of them are of persons belonging to a particular party, a message is being sent, and received. When "is we time now" becomes a multiparty rallying cry to change, exclude or include faces by race when administrations change, a message is being sent, and received.

Yet another method used in the pursuit of power is the making of arrangements with individuals and groups whose conduct over time a reasonable person might consider inimical to the best interest of Trinidad and Tobago. I read now, without comment, an excerpt from the Privy Council judgment of May 5 this year on the appeal brought by Lennox Phillip, also called Yasin Abu Bakr, against the Attorney- General:

"The essence of the agreement between the Prime Minister and Mr Abu Bakr on behalf of (the) Jamaat was that certain advantages would be given to the Jamaat out of State property, in return for securing voting support for the Prime Minister's political party. In the opinion of the Board this was corrupt within the meaning and intendment of section 3" - that is, section 3 of the 1987 Prevention of Corruption Act - "and each party to the agreement was acting in contravention of the section...(T)he whole purpose of this

agreement was to obtain electoral advantage for one political party, the PNM, by means of using State property, and as such it was clearly illegal.”

As I said, I make no comment. I leave you to draw your own conclusions.

It is not enough, however, to point to these failings and these assaults on the philosophy and practice of good governance. If this is our country, we the wider population have an inescapable responsibility to take the action needed for improvement. What should we do? What are we doing?

The *Newsday* editorial of last August 17, titled “Race resolution”, puts forward an initiative. It proposes that party leaders and executives pledge themselves to the task of national unity and an end to racial divisiveness. They should then agree on a memorandum of understanding clearly outlining their goals, the benefits and details of their planning, and so on. The editorial further suggests the methods by which this could be accomplished.

The proposal is imaginative and deserving of serious study with a view to implementation. I do have two reservations about it. The first is that it appears to assume that we have a range of leaders in the political arena who are capable of rising above partisan pettiness, and willing to do so, in the best interest of the nation. That is the essence of statesmanship, and I regret to say that if we have any statesmen in our political firmament, I am yet to discern them. Nevertheless, I commend the *Newsday* proposal to you. We have to break out of the constraints that increasingly tighten around us. We cannot go on like this.

My second reservation about the proposal is that it appears to give all responsibility for ushering in positive action to the very politicians who have spent decades in a morass of negativity. But the population in general has to become more involved in its welfare. I would therefore wish to see the ordinary man and woman in this society spend less time insisting on his or her *rights*, important as those are, and much more time being aware of, and putting into practice, his or her *responsibilities*.

I am nonetheless heartened by what, in the last year or two, I have been reading and hearing by way of public comment on our situation. I find that people are more questioning, less ready to accept at face value the soothing statements of officialdom, more inclined not only to criticise but also to offer solutions. Political hierarchies over time have come to believe that wisdom resides only within their ranks, and they therefore do not welcome this development. That is a very good reason for me to urge you to continue to make them dislike it, until we reach the point of having them accept that it is *we* who put them there, and that it is they who are accountable to *us*.

So forget all the ole talk about “lack of respect” and “who voted for you” and the like. This country belongs to *all* of us. Some have a temporary stewardship the majority have conferred on them, and they must never be allowed to think that they have been granted licence to “mash up de place”.

But there is more we must do, ladies and gentlemen. The *Newsday* editorial focuses on race, and we are all familiar with the touchy role that race plays in our society. We live side by side without knowing a great deal about one another. How many of us, for instance, have two genuine friends of a race different from ours?

To a significant extent that deficiency is psychological, by which I mean that we have voluntarily assumed the ostrich position of burying our heads in the sand, as if this would make threats disappear. Although we know better, we still go about proclaiming that “all ah we is one”, that we are a “rainbow country”, and all the other vacuities that we concoct to keep us from dealing frontally with the reality around. And when reality corners us, we cuss and carry on, and often run to Anand Ramlogan, who, thank God, has a first-rate grasp of reality.

Not without reason, people of Indian origin here often charge racial discrimination. But as a person of African origin I cannot tell you how frequently I have heard the complaint that “black man cyah get nutten in dis country. Dem Indian gettin’ everyt’ing.” Then go and speak to people of Syrian/Lebanese or European or Chinese origin and get *their* sentiments. All in varying degrees feel racially insecure. The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, that *every race and ethnic group in this place considers itself second-class and in some way disadvantaged*. In that sense, at least, all ah we is one.

And while I’m about it, let’s not forget that many other forms of discrimination – by religion, by gender, by age, by socio-economic stratum, by culture, by region, and so on – exist and have for generations existed in this country. What have we been doing about all these imperfections, these manifestations of inequity? The answer is: “Not much.”

What we do is focus on specifics like allegations of racial discrimination in the Public Service, or of racial imbalance in the Police Service or in the medical and legal professions. This is a piecemeal approach which often helps only to aggravate sentiments of discrimination and unfairness. What we have not done, and what I want to suggest this evening we do, is carry out a searching and detailed analysis of the structure of the society *as a whole* so that we may be better able to understand its elements and properties and thus be better able to deal with ourselves and one another, and with the fundamental issues facing us.

I mentioned a psychological deficiency. But it is more than that. At bottom, our education system has not confronted our diversity and sought to make it a core element of mutual comprehension in the society. To the contrary, we persist in the old ways.

For example, the First and Second Primers of Nelson's West Indian Readers, which I used in colonial Trinidad and Tobago nearly 70 years ago at the Chaguanas Government School, are still around in 2009. In republican Trinidad and Tobago, only a few years short of our 50th birthday, "q" still stands for "queen". And in this multiracial country, every child shown in the First Primer's illustrations, every single one, is not only white but blond. Tell me, is this the way to build *national* unity?

Our shortcomings in this area continue. When, for instance, I ask educationists how the task of nation-building is tackled by the school curriculum at secondary level, I am told that there is a subject called "Social Studies". But I am also told that teachers are free to interpret that phrase as they wish, and that they tend to concentrate on matters which in their opinion are likely to generate exam questions. In that blinkered approach, the central issue of how we live with and relate to one another does not receive priority. Rather, the national obsession with the number of passes gained by this or that school takes precedence over the need to construct a viable society. But what need? Ent all ah we is one?

Just as development cannot come about through announcements detached from the dynamics of the society, ladies and gentlemen, so unity cannot be forged by the uttering of slogans, and certainly not by the pointing of fingers. You have to work at unity, and work without let-up. The primary, even the pre-primary, school is an appropriate place to start, and I hope that you here tonight can and will bring your influence to bear in the relevant areas.

There is more that the average man and woman can do. You have voices, and more and more you have been using them. Keep on using them; **DO NOT BE INTIMIDATED**. Increase the volume, but avoid cacophony.

We must be eternally vigilant, as I have advised. In doing so, however, we must have order and discipline. Within this framework, I suggest greater and more structured community effort. Emotion is fine, but an excess of it permits those who would divide us to divide more effectively, and rule with greater vigour and confidence.

For instance, what has the Chaguanas community been doing on the question of the so-called "local government reform"? Does the community even realise what I indicated earlier in my remarks, that the proposed exercise is really a strengthening of central government control over the borough, and therefore an expansion of the very centralist philosophy we must struggle against? Is that what Chaguanas wants, to be part of the colonial empire of the Port of Spain Cabinet? If not, what is Chaguanas doing about it? Or is Chaguanas too fascinated by its current political soap opera to pay attention to its real long-term business? What about other corporations and councils in the country?

The ordinary man and woman must also seek to place more emphasis on the *national* and less on the personal and sectional. I know that isn't easy. We tend, naturally enough, to be more preoccupied with what affects us directly than with the broader wellbeing. I have hope, however, that once the community effort gets properly underway, the vision of the *national* welfare will become clearer. It will take a long time, because we have regressed so much. But it can be done. It *has* to be done. We cannot go on like this.

The ordinary man and woman must also insist on genuine consultation with, and accountability from, those they have placed in political office. Public meetings in which people come to tell you what they say they have done or are doing on your behalf are not, and cannot ever be, genuine consultation – or, indeed, consultation of any kind.

What such meetings in fact are is the old-style top-down approach to governance, where the people are merely bystanders and the objects of “wisdom” from on high. They are not involved in their own welfare. For instance, what do we really know about announced plans for economic and political union with a number of East Caribbean states? How will the implementation of these plans affect us?

There are other issues we could talk about, ladies and gentlemen, but I think I have abused your patience enough. What I urge you to do, on the eve of yet another anniversary of our political independence, and in the wake of the NCIC's own recent anniversary, is ask whether political independence has been translating into the independence of the mind, and the forms of governance, that we need for our ordered development in all areas. If this has not been happening, or if it *has* been happening but in a haphazard and ultimately perilous way, I urge you further to begin the task of reconstruction within your own groups and communities.

Complacency is not an option. We cannot go on like this. We simply cannot go on like this.

Thank you.

Reginald Dumas
August 28, 2009.