

Most Hon. P. J. Patterson, ON, OCC, OE, PC, QC

“A Cri de Coeur for CARICOM: Lest we wither on the Vine”

Leaving the topic for a speech to your Guest can be an unwarranted risk, especially for one who has retired from the political scene to the confines of the pavilion.

But for me, now a grandfather of 4, I am entitled to reminisce and have learnt to proffer advice which does not always accord with what my grandchildren are prepared to follow.

Nevertheless, let me share with you some musings of a doting grandfather and offer a viewpoint on the future direction of our Region to which I have an umbilical connection:

“A Cri de Coeur for CARICOM: Lest we wither on the Vine”

I readily recall my first visit as a Minister to Georgetown in April 1973. There was an air of excitement as Caribbean delegations gathered to implement the decisions our Leaders had taken in Chaguaramas the previous year to establish a Caribbean Community and to deepen the integration process by moving from a Free Trade Area into a Common Market. We worked with intensity to complete the Georgetown Accord by daybreak. We had to stop the clock shortly before midnight on Thursday 12th, so as to avoid the reality of signing on Friday the 13th.

This marked the start of an exciting era when the value of integration was high and Leaders were prepared to take bold decisions and emphasize the advantages of joint and coordinated action.

The four Independent Countries then, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago defied the Hemispheric embargo and extended full Diplomatic Recognition to Cuba.

After vigorous analysis and soul-searching debates, those countries not yet Independent, agreed to abandon Part IV of the negotiations with the European Economic Community, so that the entire Caribbean could negotiate as a bloc.

It was here in Georgetown that the ACP Group was formally launched so that we could with the countries of Africa and Pacific form a single phalanx to create an entirely new form of trade and economic relationships – based on sovereign equality and no longer on an imperial relationship. The result was Lomé I.

I trust the members of this audience do not belong to that group who constantly castigate CARICOM as having achieved nothing worthwhile. Had that been the case, it would like several other Regional Groupings, have collapsed long ago by virtue of its own inertia.

I cite but a few of its accomplishments:

- (i) There is a fine record in the areas of functional cooperation – education, health, response to natural disasters, development financing spring readily to mind.
- (ii) Despite the hiccups which are often evident, there has been a dismantling of the sturdy barriers to trade and commerce.
- (iii) The Single Market is now established, but admittedly, much more can be done to stimulate regional commerce.
- (iv) Both in the fields of international diplomacy and the arenas of global trade and commerce, the CARICOM voice has been loud and unequivocal, even if it has not always elicited the positive responses we seek from the industrialized nations.
- (v) The CCJ is now empowered to exercise its Original Jurisdiction and fully equipped, for those who so choose, to also serve as the Court of Final Jurisdiction for our nations.

Notwithstanding these and other achievements, the voices who question the relevance and endurance of CARICOM are becoming increasingly strident and vociferous.

Even those of us who remain convinced that regional economic integration is not simply an option but an imperative, must frankly ask ourselves why is this so? What has caused the obvious diminution in the minds of our people as to the relevance and useful purpose of the Caribbean Community?

It is not good enough to realize that these doubts have appeared elsewhere – e.g. the recent decision by the British Government to hold a referendum on future relationships with the EU.

We must examine our own circumstances and realize that the answers lie within us.

There should be no need for me to elaborate on the weaknesses which have plagued CARICOM since they have been repeatedly mentioned in many expert studies. In any event, time will not allow – but let me cite the most serious –

- (i) The failure to settle a structure for effective governance and the absence of which leads to a deficit in the implementation of solemn decisions.
- (ii) The delay in re-engineering the machinery within the Secretariat and Regional Institutions to effectively co-ordinate and execute agreed programmes in a rapidly changing environment which raises new issues, seemingly with every passing day.
- (iii) Moving at the speed of a tortoise in advancing the protocol on the Contingent Rights of CARICOM professionals to permit greater freedom of movement.

What purpose does the CARICOM Passport serve if travelling within the Region is still like an obstacle race?

- (iv) The failure of the Community to tackle the burning issues of concern to our people – transportation within the region, energy, food, climate change.

In fairness, we can mention with pride our collective response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Let me make it clear – as of now, some decisive steps are urgently required to rescue CARICOM, or else life support may come too late to prevent coma.

None of this will be achieved without a renewal of political commitment; implementation of long outstanding decisions and the design of fresh initiatives that can ignite the imagination and meaningfully engage the interests of our people.

New Global Contours

Admittedly, our Political Leaders today confront global contours which are vastly different from those we faced 4 decades ago. The configuration of Europe now encompasses 26 nations, many of which make major huge financial demands on Community budgetary allocations for their own development and who have no historical relationship with the Caribbean or little interest. With the advent of the WTO, preferential arrangements for sugar, bananas, rum, rice no longer exist. Reciprocal treatment is the order of the day. Globalization has become the mantra which results in a spread of contagion whenever recession occurs in the developed world and poses a threat of virtual extinction in much of the developing world. We in the Caribbean still remain particularly vulnerable to regressive trends in the global economy.

The search by every Government to tackle its own domestic problems, should not result in the abandonment of sound regional strategies. There are distinct areas where we can all benefit by a collective approach in finding solutions which sustain the regional thrust rather than becoming marooned within each restricted national space.

As we watch the emergence of the growing power and potential of the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – we can identify sound prospects for economic collaboration and the expansion of trade – new sources of capital investment – an increase in the exchange of goods and services – development in new Green Technologies.

In doing this, we should identify what we have to offer in exchange – e.g. production for access to external markets, hub for logistics, promoting the range of creative industries, culture, sports.

Foreign Economic Policy

At the Meeting of CARICOM Heads in St. Lucia, last July, Prime Minister Kenny Anthony proposed the urgency of CARICOM nations formulating a common foreign economic policy to take into account the profound changes on the global landscape. This commendable exercise should not be allowed to languish.

As we did in our encounter with Europe, we should now be formulating a common strategic approach for the new global construct before time runs out. We need urgently a new framework for CARICOM Economic Cooperation and Development with China – which has manifested its Caribbean thrust by a range of investments in our physical infrastructure, and with Brazil – the powerhouse which borders both Guyana and Suriname.

The advent of globalization, the rapid changes in technology, the factors which drive a competitive market economy all combine to dictate that we are compelled to select and prioritize those areas in which we enjoy a comparative advantage.

The Knowledge Economy

Now more than ever, knowledge is power. No one suggests that we disregard our natural sources or abandon the field of primary commodities. But no one can question that building a knowledge economy holds the key to our survival and future prosperity. The building and accumulation of our human capital is the only secure way forward.

It demands a paradigm shift from reliance on physical resources to engendering human resources as the catalyst for our development. As we plan for the future, greater emphasis must be placed on Human Capital formation so that development is more knowledge based and oriented to services.

Our education system, with the Regional University and our Tertiary Institutions, must be directed to spearhead this process and to engage in cutting edge research. This has to fuel the spread of creative industries and be a source for the preservation and renewal of that which we identify as the unique Caribbean civilization.

We should foster the spread of the creative industries – a wide range of businesses that encompass Food, Fashion, Literature, Sports, Entertainment, the Visual Arts. Why should we not capitalize on our prowess in dance, in craft, in music, literature and sports?

Why should a region which has produced the only musical instrument of the last century – the steel pan – the song of the Millennium – Bob Marley’s “One Love” – a Cricket Team which conquered the world for 17 long years – an Earl Lovelace, a Martin Carter, an Eddie Grant, the world’s fastest human being – Usain Bolt - have a balance of payments or unemployment problem?

CARIFESTA

The Region’s talents in the cultural field, in the artistic and musical industries were on display at the 1972 CARIFESTA in Georgetown.

CARIFESTA will be celebrated in Suriname later this year. This opportunity should not only be used to relaunch CARIFESTA, but to prepare to take CARIFESTA to the world at the time of staging the 2016 Olympics in Brazil.

The Caribbean will be expected to again excite on the track. We should aim to benefit economically from providing cultural entertainment off the track, while establishing its cultural and artistic prowess in South America, as we move closer to that region for economic cooperation.

A Centre for Knowledge Creation

In speaking of the Caribbean as a centre for knowledge creation, we should fashion a knowledge management centre to support projects and enterprises, public and private, throughout the Caribbean Region.

The basic idea is to create a unit/team that is charged with developing and executing a strategy to manage knowledge as a strategic asset, with the focus on encouraging across the region, knowledge sharing on past successes (strategic, projects, joint ventures, process, procedure, practice) in the private sector and in government with the stated goal of leveraging shared knowledge to facilitate, attract and trigger investments and economic growth.

CARICOM countries could benefit from having access to a reliable, credible source of information and knowledge on past business (and government) successes and on current opportunities with the information archived online, properly identified, catalogued, distributed, promoted, discussed with appropriate electronic and other tools that contributors and users can use to mine the data to gain insights from the successful (and perhaps the failed and developing) strategies, processes and practices in private sector and government entities, including vital knowledge and expertise that's resident in individuals in the region and the Diaspora or embedded in organizations.

This knowledge management initiative would enable contributors and users to leverage past success stories, experiences, insights and lessons to create strategic advantage, and to inform, facilitate and trigger investments and growth handles.

Activity generates momentum. Momentum stimulates enthusiasm. CARICOM needs enthusiasm and interest, especially among the young people of the region whose experiences are rather different from those of past generations and mine.

It needs joint activities to build hope and true meaning.

We have created World Beaters and Leaders, but they must be able to dream big – to see beyond their island borders.

Our people have demonstrated their capacity for excellence in every field. If at the level of governance we even appear to be dysfunctional, the vineyard will wither.

Critical Resources

The Caribbean has some critical borderless resources which are becoming more and more vital in modern day human and business development.

The Caribbean Sea; the air and our atmospheric spaces are vital to transportation, communication and the movement of information. Our marine and land-based biodiversity with a very high percentage of endemic fauna and flora, including naturally occurring medicinal plants; the energy resources of oil and gas; solar and wind; ocean thermal and wave; geothermal; rivers and ever recurring biomass.

The Caribbean Sea

This is currently one of the most heavily trafficked seas in the world. It is about to become many times more so with the conjuncture of the widening and deepening of the Panama Canal

to accommodate mega ships of two and three times the largest in operation today and the shift of the centre of world economic activity from North America and Western Europe to Asia and the Pacific. Currently the Caribbean earns mainly the pollution. It is time to change this.

(i) The Yachting Industry offers considerable scope for development. Many islands have invested significantly in Marinas and Registries. An increase of employment would require highly specialized skills.

(ii) Expansion of Maritime Training.

The Region should expeditiously agree on a strategy to leverage the reputation of Caribbean maritime Institute (CMI), to expand its operations and create linkages with other appropriate Training Institutions to establish a strong Regional Maritime Training Network.

The network could also include the Training Institutions of the Disciplinary Forces.

Agriculture and Food

Thirty years ago, the CARICOM Region was a significant net exporter of food and agro-based products. Since then, food importation has grown rapidly and agricultural exports have declined. The major crops – sugar, bananas, rice, citrus, nutmegs and arrowroot have lost ground in advantageous markets and reduced government support for the production. Prices have fallen and input costs have risen.

Subsidized imports which kept prices low are becoming scarce and expensive. Here is a golden opportunity to reignite production not of the traditional crops but of new food yields for agro industry, for energy and for animal feed.

The CARICOM Enterprise:

A Proposal by the President of Suriname

President Bouterse of Suriname, as Chairman of CARICOM a year ago, made a highly important recommendation for CARICOM at this stage. He proposed essentially that Groups of Members promote jointly owned enterprises (by Public or Private Sector) to develop critical resources available in the region.

This is the concept of the CARICOM ENTERPRISE which was approved before the CSME and is consistent with it once all willing Member States are included.

Areas which come immediately to mind are in Agriculture, Mining, Energy, Fisheries, Agro Processing and even Marketing. It should be vigorously pursued.

A Revised Treaty

This year we observe the 40th Anniversary of CARICOM. There is a compelling need for new thinking about the Community into the next 40 years. New ideas must be generated from widespread discussion about the direction, priorities and the construct of the integration movement based on the political geographic, economic and social realities of the Region and the wider world.

Tonight, I make a clarion call to revisit the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas. This legal underpinning of the current construct has carried us this far. But the time has come for its revision, as we provide the blueprint for a brighter Community future.

The Revised Treaty is essentially trade based and only identifies best endeavours in other areas. There is an urgent need to place greater emphasis on production integration which would allow us to pool the resources of the Community and exploit them more effectively.

We must push the frontiers of integration further to include a common air space and a common ICT space. The issue of transportation and a common air space has bedeviled us but hard choices must be made if we are to advance in this area which is so critical to our integration.

With respect to ICT, why is it that a call from Guyana to Jamaica must be long distance? Why is it that our internet rates are so high?

Addressing both these issues would make our Region much more competitive, attractive for the conduct of business and also contribute to our overall development.

The CARICOM Machinery

The CARICOM Secretariat has been mandated to prepare and be guided by a five year Community Strategic Plan. This process of change and reform cannot be limited to the Secretariat. The Organs of the Community must also be put under the microscope. The role and functions of the Institutions in our integration architecture must be scrutinized to ensure that we are all heading in the same direction and with the same expedition. There is an urgency for us to get on with it. The Organs and Institutions of the Community, especially the CARICOM Secretariat, must take on this challenge as their top priority. In doing so, however, they must be afforded the space required – for strategic thinking, mobilizing, discussing – to maximize the effect on the ground in fulfillment of the Community objectives. The entire Region, from Heads of Government to ordinary citizen, from institution to Non-Governmental Organization and our Universities must turn its attention to these urgent imperatives. The Community of tomorrow must be built today – deliberately and inclusively.

I have mentioned a few areas, many of which are by no means novel, that will make a tremendous difference to the present perception of CARICOM and, even more importantly, impact positively on the development of our people.

Admittedly, in a time of severe resource constraints, CARICOM Heads will have to determine priorities among competing claims and set firm priorities and a rigid time-table on specific areas to accelerate regional growth and development.

Tough choices will have to be made and soon – But as Bujari Banton reminds us – *“It’s not an easy road.”*

Without the political will and the concerted action by Regional Stakeholders – Governments, Opposition Parties, the Business Sector, Labour, NGO’s, the media – CARICOM is in danger. It needs concerted action, simultaneously on all fronts so that it does not dwindle or fall into desuetude.

We must create a groundswell of support for integration in every Member State and Associate Member; build alliances of private citizens who are prepared to champion the cause of integration and create meaningful linkages between and among themselves.

I renew my plea of 2009 from Georgetown to combine all our endeavours “to move our Caribbean people on the path of economic prosperity and social progress to ensure that we fashion a Caribbean civilization embedded in strong regional consciousness and rooted in the promotion of human dignity for those who call the Caribbean our only home.”

Once again, let the voices be heard from Georgetown – Rally round the West Indies!

[Speech given by former Jamaican Prime Minister the Most Hon. P. J. Patterson to the Georgetown (Guyana) Rotary Club on January 28, 2013]

[Editor’s Note: From the vantage point of being at the founding of, shaping, and nurturing regional integration and the CARICOM Region, former Jamaican Prime Minister, the Most Hon. P. J. Patterson, in a speech to the Georgetown (Guyana) Rotary Club on January 28, 2013, offered a viewpoint on the future direction of the CARICOM Region.

He was firm on the need for urgent response to CARICOM’s problems:

“Let me make it clear – as of now, some decisive steps are urgently required to rescue CARICOM, or else life support may come too late to prevent coma.”

He concluded by calling on regional leaders, in his words:

“CARICOM Heads will have to determine priorities among competing claims and set firm priorities and a rigid time-table on specific areas to accelerate regional growth and development.”

Mr. Patterson’s elucidation of the issues besetting CARICOM and regional integration and needed actions is a valuable contribution to the discussions and analyses on the issue.]