



ADDRESS BY

**THE RT. HON. OWEN ARTHUR
PRIME MINISTER OF BARBADOS**

TO THE

OPENING CEREMONY OF

**THE 22ND CONFERENCE OF
THE CARIBBEAN HEADS OF GOVERNMENT**

**NASSAU, BAHAMAS
JULY 3, 2001**

Your Excellency, The Governor General of the Bahamas, Prime Minister Ingraham and fellow Heads of Government, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to return to Nassau to enjoy once more the excellent company of my good friend and colleague, Prime Minister Ingraham and the hospitality of his beautiful country, while doing the region's work.

I am especially pleased that on this occasion I have the honour of transferring from my hand to his the mantle of Chairmanship of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community.

Those who allege that he and I form a tag team in the Community's affairs, will now have their confidence in that belief greatly fortified.

The Caribbean Community, however, could not have wished for a better caretaker of its affairs at this important juncture in regional development; and I have the fullest confidence that the attributes for great leadership that he has so amply displayed in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas will find great expression in the wider theatre of regional affairs.

My first venture at the helm of Conference was somewhat imposed upon me some seven years ago through a fortuitous encounter with the ballot box of Barbados.

To assume the leadership of one's country and of Caricom at one and the same time, with no previous experience in either, can be a rather unnerving experience, since neither is really an entry level job.

You will therefore not be surprised if I admit that I found the current Chairmanship vastly more rewarding.

To be sure, the past six months have been an active period for our region.

We have witnessed the historic signing of the Agreement to establish the Caribbean Court of Justice.

We have put the finishing touches to the legal framework for the Single Market and Economy.

We launched the Pan Caribbean Partnership for HIV/AIDS, to enable us to more effectively combat the greatest threat to human security in the Caribbean.

We have hopefully laid the foundations for a more productive relationship with the international financial institutions and donor community by entering an Agreement to create the Caribbean Technical Assistance Centre.

We can also take pride in the role that our Community played in ensuring the integrity of the democratic process in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and in Guyana.

We assembled in Montego Bay to dialogue with our friend Jean Chretien, and initiated the process to build a deeper and more mature economic relationship with Canada.

We journeyed on to Quebec City to engage our Hemispheric partners in dialogue on an Agenda to create a new American Community, in the image of Bolivar, and presented to that gathering a compelling image of Caribbean cohesiveness, and a determination to bring our rich diversity to bear on the forging of a new Hemispheric identity.

We stood firm and gave energy and leadership to the international effort to blunt the unilateral, unprovoked and unwarranted attack on our right to economic self-determination posed by the OECD Harmful Tax Initiative.

If there is a common thread that runs through the events of the last six months, it is perhaps the fact that Caricom is broadening its reach internationally, while simultaneously consolidating its internal solidarity and unity of purpose.

There is therefore much to be positive and hopeful about.

Evidence of this positive, hopeful outlook was clearly present at the opening of the Eighth Parliament of Guyana, and the serious and constructive process of national reconciliation which has been energised by President Jagdeo and former President Hoyte.

The Government and people of Guyana need and deserve our Community's continued sensitive support in their collective endeavour to move the country forward. For its part, the Community needs a strong and prosperous Guyana.

In our mission to Suriname, we were struck by the desire, at all levels to identify entirely with Caricom and to be fully integrated into the mainstream of our regional affairs.

Suriname has the potential to play a major role in the development of the Caricom region, and its President is to be commended for his determination to make this a reality.

The rest of the region must reach out to Suriname, and I urge strongly that the momentum and goodwill generated by our first mission to Suriname be built upon in the months ahead.

The paradoxical simplicity and complexity of the Caribbean was nowhere better illustrated than in the jungles of Suriname, where my delegation dialogued with an Amerindian Chief while simultaneously grappling with the continuing crisis in Haiti. It is a matter of considerable concern to all that the situation in Haiti remains difficult, with no end in sight to the impasse. Caricom is committed to assisting the people of Haiti in their search for stable democratic government, and will remain engaged towards that end. It has recently set up a Caricom office in Port-au-Prince from which its outreach effort will be further developed. It is important however to reinforce the message given earlier that a total commitment to the provisions of the Caricom Charter of Civil Society, and a demonstrated adherence to its basic norms are necessary pre-conditions for the full membership of Haiti in the Caribbean Community.

As I demit the office of Chairman of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community, I leave you with a few thoughts on the way forward.

Colonialism may previously have provided an excuse for us to indulge an indigenous passion to doubt ourselves, and to revel in the failure and under performance of our institutions and our societies.

The people of the Caribbean are however tired of failure.

They wish to live in and help develop a successful region.

We must stop doubting ourselves. We simply must go on. We must find the way through.

We must not be intimidated by the prospect of creating a Single Market and Economy, when around us there is the evidence of successful small economies.

The clock is ticking for the Caribbean Single Market and Economy. It should have come into existence in 1993. It will now only be a serious force in Caribbean economic affairs up to 2005, when we will essentially become part of a Single Hemispheric Market and Economy.

Can we afford to tarry?

We must not create new institutions, vital to Caribbean progress, such as a Caribbean Court of Justice and a Regional Negotiating Machinery, and then frustrate and destroy them as if, in the words of Shakespeare they are "flies to wanton boys".

And, as a region whose modern and more vibrant economic sectors have thrived without relying upon preferences, we must cease fearing the prospect of having to compete on reciprocal terms in the global arena. Certainly we must cease hankering after a past, which was plagued with poverty, because of the very trade preferences whose chains we have come to regard as wings.

We must therefore confront our relationship with the WTO and the FTAA and with the European Union and the Global Society with the resolution and confidence we have shown in dealing with the OECD, drawing upon the creative imagination we have consistently displayed in attaining the highest possible standards in the arts, in athletics, formerly in cricket, the governance of our political systems, and in the development of cohesive societies that stand as models for the international community.

This country, The Bahamas, has often stood at the crossroads of history.

In 1492, it was the theatre for the encounter between two worlds, and bore witness to the dramatic transformation of whole societies and cultures by that encounter.

Today our region faces an invasion by a new world, which is every bit as traumatic and unfamiliar as the one visited upon us some 509 years ago.

It is therefore of great historic symbolism that the modern Caribbean, in the first year of a new millennium, should take a stand for its continued successful development in this country where so much was initiated 500 years ago.

I therefore hand over the mantle of leadership of our regional affairs to the Prime Minister of The Bahamas, in this most developed corner of the Caribbean, confident that his country's success reflects the enduring Caribbean spirit to overcome diversity, no matter how great the challenge may be.