

**Address by His Excellency George Maxwell Richards, TC, CMT, PhD
at the Ceremonial Opening of the First Session
of the 10th Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
Fiday, 18 June 2010**

President of the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, other Members of Parliament.

Having determined, by Proclamation dated 4th June, 2010, that the Tenth Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago should begin with a Session to be held at the Red House in Port of Spain, on Friday 18th June, 2010, at 1.30 p.m., I am happy to be here this afternoon, as we continue with the Ceremonial Opening of this, the First Session.

I acknowledge the presence of the Honourable Mr. Justice Ivor Archie, Chief Justice, Sir Ellis Clarke, former President, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, distinguished visitors from overseas, particularly our Caricom family, and other distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

I congratulate every person who has been elected or selected to serve the people of our country, following the general election of 24th May, 2010. I recognize you as individuals, bringing your particular expertise and skills to bear on the tasks ahead, but also as a part of a collective, working together in the Parliament, and outside, regardless of political affiliation, to take the business of the people of Trinidad and Tobago forward.

It is the first time in the history of our nation that we have at the helm of Government, a woman, and it is fitting that special acknowledgement be given to that fact, [Applause] a fact which you have recognized merits applause for the very many things that it connotes. Let us see this for what it is: evidence of the process of maturing that has been taking place, the women of Trinidad and Tobago positioning themselves in order to secure a more visible profile in leadership roles, in every aspect of life in our country.

For those who have eyes to see, this is not happenstance or something that has occurred by chance. It strikes me that the rewards of embracing opportunities for education, in its broadest sense, as well as gaining relevant experience in the various avenues of national life are evident, and the women of this country ought to be keenly aware of the signals that are being sent. A more gentle caring society, yes, but there must be no room whatever for patronage.

The country has come out of a rigorous, if not, most bruising election campaign, and, as the then Prime Minister-elect stated, as the result of the polls became clear, "the elections are over". These are profound words which we would all, every single one of us, do well to

remember and to embrace, with scrupulous exactitude. We are now witnessing a handing over process which appears to be going well and it is my hope that all who are involved will be sensitive to the need to ensure a smooth transition, so that the country can settle down in this new dispensation. I extend best wishes to the new Prime Minister and her team, as I do to the new Leader of the Opposition and his team. Professional public servants, representing a continuum and dedicated to the welfare of our country are there to help you.

Much work needs to be done to build upon the past; adjusting, as necessary, and forging ahead with appropriate thrust. In this context, in considering our several independent institutions established under our Constitution which guides the Executive, we must be careful to properly assess their value. The pace of delivery of some of them may not quite meet the demands with which we are faced, but I advise caution against consigning them to history. I advocate, rather, that the conditions under which they function be dispassionately examined, in order to ensure that they are properly equipped to fulfil their tasks and, moreover, that these conditions are such as to consolidate their independence as guardians of our democracy.

As I have said, at another time in this House, while policy decisions are the business of the Government and the Parliament, executing of policy relies heavily on agents of the State and others, throughout the national community, at every level of the society.

The matter of productivity is relevant, and in the context, also, of world competitiveness, where there has been considerable slippage in respect of Trinidad and Tobago. As I mentioned not long ago, we have slipped from 42nd place on the Global Competitiveness Index in 2002/2003 to 86th in 2009/2010, out of 133 countries. But productivity does not suddenly occur in a vacuum. It is a culture and a way of life that must be nurtured. While leadership in the labour movement, understandably, negotiates to secure the best compensation for the country's organized labour, from which others may benefit, even so, much greater productivity than is now the case must be required of the workforce. This is not applicable only in the formal sector, but across the board.

Moreover, the education system must be so structured and managed as to encourage a correct attitude to productivity and a better understanding of what this means for our country, in terms of poverty alleviation and eradication, becoming more self-sufficient, and being at the forefront of development.

Poverty alleviation and eradication will not become reality in a culture of low productivity. There is no question, but there are those in our society who must be assisted because of their financial circumstances, but programmes of such assistance, particularly at the lower age bracket, must be so organized as to enable recipients to work their way out of dependence on State benevolence. We ask ourselves: How far must State benevolence go? What are the

entitlements of the people? How much of these entitlements must a government provide? These are matters that can be debated from different perspectives and it is certain that different and opposing views will persist for a long time.

We all know that a government must take the lead in the provision of certain basic services, for example, health care, water, electricity, roads and transportation, and we expect that the pace of development in these areas will be accelerated. Housing is another area in which an aggressive policy must be pursued. The private sector will continue to play its part, responsibly recognizing, it is hoped, that the market is way beyond the reach of the working and middle classes and collaborate in doing something about it, in order to pull back the working poor from homelessness. Make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen, the working poor are a reality, but they are not as recognizable as the indigent among us and so, their plight can be easily ignored, while others take centre stage. How much is expected of the Government and how are the needs to be met? I leave this burning question before you in the hope that fairness and responsible action be the bedrock on which decisions will be taken.

Everyone, including the most vulnerable, has a part to play in the economy and it is a responsibility about which as a people, on the whole, we must have greater awareness. This is a fact that must be inculcated in our children. The artisans, providers in our indigenous and evolving food culture, home makers, technicians and professionals, exponents of the arts, for example, must all assume their places in moving the economy forward. I am of the view that not enough attention is paid to the informal sector. And so, our people have forgotten the sewing machines, the bakers' ovens, the homemade hot pepper sauce and confectionery, to name just a few items of cottage industry, which have sometimes provided the means necessary to produce the next generation of highly qualified and distinguished persons. Too many of us have forgotten, or do not know, about small beginnings and sacrifice.

By seeking a recognized and critical space for that category of potential contributor, I am by no means suggesting that we keep our manufacturing sector, for example, in the early 20th Century mode. We must have an advanced state-of-the-art manufacturing sector based on the use of new and established scientific and technological knowledge, embracing the potential role of existing technologies such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, new materials, as well as information and communications technology, which have broad applications and which impact the economy.

But in continually seeking to modernize that sector, so that we may be competitive in international trade, we must, at the same time, be mindful of the hard lessons of other countries. Ways and means must therefore be found to avoid further dislocation of the workforce by recalling the skills to which I have referred, as examples, in order to restore the dignity and independence of those who are currently at the lower levels of the economic

ladder, but who, through appropriate government policy, must be encouraged to see the possibility of upward mobility.

Full time employment is a highly desirable goal, but whatever the statistics say in that regard, does not alter the fact that if we work little, at our full time or part time jobs, the country will not go forward. Flexi-time, which is already a feature in this country, in the public service at least, will not assist productivity, if beating the traffic results only in workers having breakfast on the job, instead of at home, thereby cutting down the eight hour work day to seven, if not less. While there are those who go beyond the call of duty, our current level of productivity, generally, is not at all acceptable.

And this leads me to the matter of innovation, in the context of job creation which education in its proper sense must encourage. In this regard, there is ample room for innovation on the part of our people, not least our young people, at the post-secondary stage of education. As for diversification, how can we rate ourselves? This is a much overworked word in our vocabulary of plans, and in this area we have come up short; very short. Our heavy dependence on the oil and gas sector, with its inherent vicissitudes, cannot continue. Other revenue generating industries must be developed to buffer the economy against possible shocks in the international environment.

There are undeniable possibilities, for example, in agriculture, which must be geared towards the goal of food sufficiency and the consequent reduction in our massive food import bill. This would also require policy decisions and development in areas allied to that sector. There are many other avenues for diversification and in which the Government can no doubt take the lead. But ways must be found to so communicate the vision that the people, all over the country, regardless of traditional occupations, become a part of the process and are encouraged to make the choice of taking the opportunities offered.

The concern regarding diversification, which, so far, has remained largely in the realm of discussion, rests not only on the matter of income, which is very important, but there are environmental conditions or considerations as well. The time has long since come for us to harness and employ alternative sources of energy, some of which are already available to us and it is my hope that, with the new environmental legislation signalled by the Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs, serious steps will be taken in that regard.

I have sought, ladies and gentlemen, over the past several minutes, simply to highlight a few areas in which government, in its broad sense, by deliberations brought to the Parliament by the people's representatives, might engage the national community in decisions that have as their objective greater success in our nation's future. But the Government must be careful to

leave room for people to define what success means to them and room for them to achieve that success.

Parliament provides a forum where the interests of the people can be vigorously pursued and secured by legislation that provides the greatest good for the greatest number. This responsibility towards the people of our nation must not be subordinated, in the cut and thrust of political engagement. On both sides of the political divide, constituents expect to be properly represented, issues being paramount.

Discipline, law and order must be watchwords that guide our living, in this country. At the level of leadership, we have a particular charge, in this context, to avoid mixed signals. Therefore, much as we may be tempted otherwise, we need to give deep considerations to reining in ourselves so that our collective voice may achieve maximum benefit for all our citizens.

Robert Louis Stevenson is reported to have said that "Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary." I believe that there are those who have discovered otherwise and those of you who are new to the arena may want to consider an approach different from that which is suggested in the famous essayist, novelist and poet's remark.

In closing, may I exhort that you strive to make this forum attractive to the youth of our nation, to whom we must pass the baton of leadership. Let us maintain a proper tone, eschewing adversarial stances as a constant feature and respecting the separation of powers, according to our Constitution. Let us conduct our business, in this Parliament, in decency and in order, regarding one another as persons who have been blessed with the privilege of serving in the highest forum in the land and for which privilege history will hold us accountable.

May God grant you wisdom and may God bless our nation.