

**Address by His Excellency Professor George Maxwell Richards TC, CMTT,
PhD, at the Ceremonial Opening of the Third Session of the Tenth
Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, at the Parliament
Chamber, Tower D, The Port of Spain International Waterfront Centre,
on Wednesday 11th July, 2012 at 1.30 p.m.**

President of the Senate Speaker of the House of Representatives Other Members of Parliament
Specially Invited Guests Representatives of the Media Other Distinguished Ladies and
Gentlemen:

I have the privilege of addressing Members of Parliament, once again, at a Ceremonial Opening,
today marking the beginning of the Third Session of the Tenth Parliament of our Republic.

Let me give you the assurance that there is no need to brace yourselves, on the assumption
that I will be tempted to be long-winded , this being, according to plan, the last time that such a
privilege will be afforded me. I am told that in a multitude of words, there is sin and I would not
wish to be found guilty of desecrating this House, particularly in view of my role, as established
in the Constitution, as Head of the Parliament, a fact that many citizens of our country do not
know.

The relevant information stated in Chapter 4, which deals with the Parliament, Part 1, Section
39, is as follows: "There shall be a Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago which shall consist of the
President, the Senate and the House of Representatives."

As is perhaps well known, I came from a background of academia, not the ivory tower that
some people carelessly assume it to be, to serve as President of Trinidad and Tobago, "elected
in accordance with the provisions of this Chapter (that is to say Chapter 4 of the Constitution)
who shall be Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces." From March 17th 2003, when I first
took the oath of office, I have come to understand, somewhat better, what that means, certain
interpretations being subjected to some legitimate adjustment.

On occasion, during my still active sojourn in the Presidency, I have observed, with deep
interest and have come to recognize, other persons' understanding of what it means to be
President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

My conclusion is that there remains a large space for education on this matter, at all levels of
our own society, in the outside world and on the part of visitors as well.

Some may say that I have the right to orate as I please, given the context, but I have come to realize that we have become very conscious of our rights, sometimes to the exclusion of all else.

While not making light of entitlement and inalienable rights, particularly human rights and equal rights, we may want to consider them in the context of the collective, so that we may accelerate our advancement, as a nation. And as I mention equal rights, I muse about equal opportunity and ask myself whether we, every single one of us, should not be more concerned than some of us seem to be, about equal opportunity.

If that is achieved, in respect of all of us, then, what we do with our opportunity will be up to us and no one else can take responsibility for our success or failure. Moreover, we need to remind ourselves that equal opportunity is not the domain of any individual or group in our diverse population.

Decisions taken in this Parliament must be such as to ensure even-handedness and transparency in policies that affect the welfare of all our citizens. There must be equality of opportunity and merit must count above every other consideration.

With this in mind, perhaps we need to be more conscious of the provisions of our Constitution.

We should take the trouble to inform ourselves of what is in fact a contract between the people of this nation and our leaders. It is a contract that goes beyond the temporary highpoints of election drama that takes place, from time to time. It is a contract that positions our people to require of our parliamentary and local government representatives, elected as well as appointed, that the decisions taken in our Parliament, our local government bodies, the Tobago House of Assembly and, the execution of those decisions by state entities reflect the fulfilment of the promises that they make, when they choose to offer themselves for public service.

The preamble of our Constitution remains valid and relevant to the aspirations of a country such as ours, whose people are known to have made outstanding contributions to the development of other countries. Some of them have much longer recorded histories than ours and are described as developed, a status that we are striving to achieve. Waves of brain drain to these countries, which persist today, tell a story of many facets, which we ought not to ignore. We must guard against being parochial, but we must ask ourselves why our nationals would find fulfilment elsewhere. Is it by choice or because they have no other choice?

All must be included in the process of nation-building and we must recognize that expertise resides in Trinidad and Tobago which can be given preference over foreign input. In the context of a less than healthy treasury, this must be a consideration.

Every paragraph of the preamble contributes to expectations which, if assiduously pursued, can create the conditions necessary for the commonwealth, enabling the people of this country, at whatever level, to experience a sense of ownership of this space and of belonging. It is normal to preserve what you own.

What decisions are being taken, in the Parliament, the highest law-making body in our land, to make Trinidad and Tobago more wholesome and attractive to its people?

What systems are in place to develop a people more educated concerning the functioning of this country and ways and means to make it better?

This is not a flash in the pan exercise, but one that calls for measured decision-making, with an eye on the future. But in looking ahead, we must be careful, in our quest for new things, not to discard the past and behave as if it did not exist. We will find that some decisions of the past were taken on solid foundations.

In this regard, I think of education. Some may say that there was a time when we were better educated, even though there was a certain measure of exclusivity.

It may be well to examine this area and adjust appropriately, by the policy decisions that we take, so that we may not become altogether a more certified, rather than an educated people. Be that as it may, recognition must be given to what successive administrations have done, over several years, to make education more accessible and we can congratulate ourselves that we are one of the very few countries in the world where education is free, from nursery to tertiary levels.

Many things have to be done to make our systems more efficient and workable, at all levels and the education budget must reflect an understanding of this.

If we get the education right, a number of positives will follow, in other aspects of national development. But in our fixing of systems, we need to pay serious and honest attention to the quality of university education that we offer.

Recently, the discovery of a new particle with properties consistent with the Higgs boson and which has been described as the god particle, has been reported and I am quite certain that this presents another opportunity for scientific innovation which we should seize. Except for the steel pan, we have been consumers rather than innovators and we must be careful not to miss out on getting in at the ground level of this new scientific exposure and here, university education matters.

We need to become more conscious of the fact that very serious work has been done and continues to be done at our regional institution, The University of the West Indies, including its St Augustine Campus. To its credit, links have been forged, over the years, with some of the highest ranking institutions of higher learning, internationally.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there was a certain vision birthed when the University of Trinidad and Tobago was established, particularly in respect of science and technology, which is critical and UTT must do no less than the University of the West Indies. None of us, I am sure, would like to see our national university lose its relevance to the communities that it is intended to serve, as there is a preeminent place for universities in the scheme of national development.

But this can only be preserved if we are ever mindful of the purpose of university education. Our universities must also ensure that not every social value is measured in terms of technological achievement and, as I have said before, the traditional role of universities in examining philosophical and ethical questions, in critical analysis of the social order and in fostering artistic expression, must be re-endorsed, as they take on enhanced roles in orienting and training students for knowledge-based development. Critical analyses to which I have referred, must be strengthened, especially in an atmosphere in which these achievements could easily be devalued.

To achieve success, the independence of the university must be untrammelled and independent thinking be allowed to flourish.

In no way should the treasury influence the directions of the university in a young nation such as ours.

The intellectual and creative energy that the university must provide, in order to enhance the country's economic performance, cannot be compromised. The university is not a place that can accommodate anything but the best professional behaviour, in all its practices. Academic excellence can only be achieved in a climate of understanding clearly what the university is for and the seminal role that it must play in the sustainable development of any nation.

There is, consequently, no room for partisan behaviour and personal preference in appointments at the highest levels of leadership at our university or at the level of academic staff. Ability is what matters and governments and others concerned must ensure that academic autonomy is preserved.

In the matter of compromise, I cast my mind to law and order which, over the past several years, has come under siege, in this country, to an unprecedented level. In addressing this, the highest law-making body in the land, I feel compelled to join with those who rue the obvious lawlessness that confronts us.

This state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue, but, in working towards solutions, we must, on all sides, be reminded that zeal must not inform our behaviour, lest mixed signals be conveyed, if in any way, due process appears to be eschewed.

Reproach must not be allowed to impede good intention. There is no question but that joint police/army patrols have been playing a critical role in the fight against crime and in the maintenance of law and order in our country.

However, in their modus operandi, there must be a clear demonstration of understanding of the chain of command, within both entities, with wisdom dictating the levels of involvement. In this context, the philosophy of speaking truth to power must apply.

On another matter, reproach must not find a place in the working of Parliament and in this context, I am all for the independence of Parliament. I think that the time has come for such independence to be established, in every aspect, so that the work of Parliament may be enhanced and be seen to be free of bias. And there is another area within our systems where independence must be preserved. I refer to the independent Commissions established under the Constitution. I believe that everything possible should be done to ensure better working conditions for these Commissions, which were established for good reasons, reasons which have not lost their validity.

As I have mentioned before, in this honourable House, consigning them to history is not a good option. They are guardians of our democracy.

Before closing, may I say that we should be deeply appreciative of those who serve in the Parliament of our nation. You do not have an easy task and I believe that this fact could not have been fully understood, until you began to function as a parliamentarian. Your profession requires solid preparation. And I dare say that, contrary to Plato's bitter conclusion, I believe that there is a place in politics for men of conscience.

Mercy is not easily dispensed here and perhaps it should not be sought, in this arena, which is more conducive to the stance of gladiators. But in all that you do, please be reminded that, at the centre of your consciousness should be the reality that people are the reason why you are here, not opportunity.

I am thinking of the entire constituency of Trinidad and Tobago, of whatever creed, race or social condition – the retiree of whatever rank, including the judiciary, who is no longer visible and perhaps living in penury or not far from it, having given outstanding service; the working poor who does not stand out as the indigent does; those relatively small organizations that may not have the clout of established Non-Governmental Organizations but which need your help, in order to help others.

And let us not forget those who create and provide jobs - companies, cooperatives and individuals – who must make their contributions to the treasury, but must be recognized for what they do. As I have made reference to the work being done in the Parliament of which, constitutionally, I am a part, I think of the process of election of a president of Trinidad and Tobago which is clearly set out in the Constitution.

We have heard it said, repeatedly, that the President is above politics and quite separate in his sphere of operation from the Government and the Judiciary. No one can be sure how a President votes in national elections if he/she chooses to exercise this right. Yet, there are those who conveniently aver that the President is a creature of the Government in power. At this stage of our development, there can be no good excuse for continuing in this vein and, at age fifty, I am sure that we can do much better than that.

I therefore take this opportunity to thank the various administrations that have served during my tenure, for the ways in which we were able to work together in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I am sure that we were all afforded several opportunities for growth. I thank also the Officers and staff of the Parliament, at all levels, for their dedication to duty and their cooperation with the Office of the President. I wish you all very well.

And finally, how do we rate ourselves, in this golden anniversary? We have done some things right, as evidenced by the fact, inter alia, that we remain, politically, a sovereign state.

We have far to go and we cannot say that the road ahead signposts any guarantees. Indeed, if the truth be told, there are many questions, which some may choose to circumvent, but there is no wisdom in that. We have preserved our democracy but, I cite a response reportedly given by a United States President to a citizen who asked what he was giving to the people, state benevolence being at the heart of the question. He said: “A Republic, if you will preserve it”. I believe that we, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, should ponder this, as we move on from this significant landmark of fifty years. Will we preserve our Republic?

In seeking to answer that question, we may wish to consider, deeply and honestly the first base of our Republican Constitution which recalls inter alia that ...”the People of Trinidad and Tobago-(a) Have affirmed that the Nation of Trinidad and Tobago is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God, faith in fundamental rights and freedoms, the position of the family in a society of free men and free institutions, the dignity of the human person and the equal and inalienable rights with which all members of the human family are endowed by their Creator;”

In the decisions that are taken in this Parliament, have we been ever mindful to uphold these principles and the others that are stated in the Preamble?

Are we as conscious of the dignity of the human person as we might be? Is there any room for the perception that modern day slavery can flourish here and on the other hand, are we insisting on productivity as a necessary element in the preservation of human dignity?

Are we mindful of the need to turn around our lack of competitiveness in the global environment and conscious as to where that work must begin? We must take the hard look, if we are to equip ourselves, properly, to manage the next half century of independent status.

I look forward to accelerated social revolution in our country and the eradication of social insecurity, as a direct result of the collaboration, in this Parliament, of all who serve. I wish you all a most productive Session and thank you for your service to our Republic. At a personal level, I convey to you, your families and your loved ones best wishes for good success in your positive endeavours.

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for the courtesy of your kind attention and may God bless our nation!