A Hemispheric Community for a Global Age

Remarks at the Third Summit of the Americas, Quebec City, Canada, 20 April 2001 by Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur, Chairman of the Caribbean Community, and Prime Minister of Barbados

I address you today in the name of the people of the Caribbean Community. In that spirit, I am pleased to recognise that the enterprise we are engaged in today in Quebec City began in the Caribbean almost two centuries ago.

For it was in Jamaica in 1815 that the great apostle of freedom, Simon Bolivar, wrote in his famous letter, "More than anyone else, I desire to see America fashioned into the greatest nation in the world, greatest not so much by virtue of her area and wealth as, by her freedom and glory".

This Community of the Americas that we, the heirs of Bolivar, are attempting to build has its roots in, and draws its energy from, a wonderful and a rich diversity.

When I think back to the first Summit in 1994, I am struck by the dramatic transformation in the very concept of the Community that we are trying to achieve. On that occasion, propelled by the wave of trade liberalisation sweeping the world, we set out primarily to devise a plan for a free trade area of the Americas by the year 2005.

By our second Summit in Santiago in 1998, we recognised and focused on education and social issues as key to our progress. Here in Quebec City we intend to make our vision more holistic by elaborating a plan of action that not only calls for strengthening democracy and creating prosperity, but most important of all, realising human potential.

Let us commit ourselves to making this Summit, the people-centered summit. It is urgent that we must do so.

The old bipolar world of a cold war balance of terror lies in shambles about us. Few would lament its passing. Yet, now we are confronted with a set of new complex issues. We lurch from one international financial crisis to another with devastating consequences for our economies.

The traffic in illicit drugs and firearms has led to unprecedented levels of corruption and violent crime, forcing many of our law-abiding citizens to cower in their homes.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic threatens to wipe out an entire generation of the young people of our Americas.

And the continued degradation of the environment including the potentially catastrophic consequences of global warming, hangs like the sword of Damocles over us.

Compounding all of these, poverty intensifies around us.

As a consequence, our people have begun to lose confidence in the future. They tend to see only the dark side of globalisation and trade liberalisation. They fear for jobs lost, cultures destroyed and communities uprooted. They dread the coming of a "new world", dominated by an impersonal technology and an even more impersonal market in which the human being is a mere cipher.
And we, the political leaders of the Americas and others, who envision the enormous potential benefits from the forces of integration and the revolution in information technology find our voices being increasingly drowned out by the clamour against globalisation.

And, are we not in some measure to be blamed? Is it not cause for concern that so far the benefits have been so inequitably distributed? Have we, for the most part not failed to fashion new instruments for new times?

Our summits therefore have an importance that goes beyond Declarations and Action Plans. They are the only serious attempt to fashion new forms of lasting hemispheric cooperation to deal with the complex new world around us.

Indeed, we are entering an era that holds enormous and empowering promise. But that promise rests on the precarious edifice of societies and relations between societies, fractured by inequities.

The distinguished Canadian economist Gerald Helleiner has urged that the global economy can be and must be "civilised". We all must surely share that view!

As leaders of the Americas, our challenge is to ensure that the fruits of our efforts are widely and equitably distributed, both within and among our nations. To achieve this we must fashion a hemispheric community based on respect for diversity and on the full involvement of our people.

There can, however, be no community without communication and interaction. We must therefore set as our goal, the access of all citizens of the Americas to the increased flows of information, facilitated by the new technology. Our commitment to connecting the Americas will go a long way to making this Quebec City Summit a people-centered Summit.

The respect for our diversity also requires that we recognise and take into account the different levels and patterns of development in the hemisphere, paying particular regard to the special situation of our smaller societies.

What we are attempting to do through these Summits is to create a Hemispheric Community of a scale and of an intensity never before contemplated by man.

It will be a Community that will bring into the same economic and social space the world’s most powerful, and some of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable societies.

In trodding a similar path, though faced with less disparities, the European Community saw the need and the wisdom to create special financial and other mechanisms to harmoniously and beneficially integrate its poorer societies fully into its community.

Nothing less is required if we are to build a successful Community of the Americas.

We in the Caribbean remain committed to a realistic timetable for the negotiation of the FTAA by 2005.

For us, however, the creation of the FTAA is more than just about trade, it is more than just about getting tariffs and other marketing mechanisms right. It is quintessentially about expanding the horizons for economic and investment opportunities for all of us.

Our Caribbean, like the Mediterranean, has found itself repeatedly at the crossroads of history.
Yet through the trauma of genocide, wars and invasions, slavery and indentured servitude that is our history, we have not only survived, but have been extraordinarily creative as a people in fashioning a community of nations marked by freedom, justice and cooperation in the face of a stern adversity.

Our Caribbean has a vital contribution to make to the creation of the community of the Americas. Our long history of stable democratic governance, our progress in establishing societies rooted in social justice and respect for human rights, and our determination to forge communities based on ethnic and cultural diversity, are assets which we proudly bring to that wider hemispheric process.

The Caribbean's democratic tradition has especially been exemplified by respect for and tolerance of differences of opinions. That experience leads us to the strong belief that we can and must fashion a hemispheric community from which no one is excluded, least of all in the name of democracy. The time must certainly have come for engaging Cuba constructively in the creation of a comprehensive community of the Americas.

Let us therefore not shirk our historic responsibility here in Quebec City. The challenges we face are daunting.

Let us make it our responsibility at this Summit to reassure all the peoples of the Americas that we are sensitive to the problems facing us; that we have the courage to tackle them; and that we can summon the political will to provide the resources for resolving them.

We can do so not just by creating a free trade area of the Americas, but a hemispheric community based on tolerance and respect for each other; a community that will realise the full human potential of all the citizens of the Americas; a community that will transform, if I may be permitted to paraphrase the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "... the jangling discord of our nations into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood".

On behalf of the Caribbean Community, I thank the Government of Canada for the opportunity of meeting in this beautiful, historic city and of experiencing the warm and generous hospitality of its people. Quebec City symbolises the cultural and linguistic diversity that enriches our hemisphere. It is not always easy to create unity out of diversity. Ask any Canadian. But it is more than worth the effort. I have no doubt that our meeting here will be inspired by these values.

I thank you.