

Address by Leader of the Opposition Tillman Thomas of the National Democratic Congress on the Occasion of Grenada's 32nd Anniversary of Independence

7 February 2006

It is with a sense of pride dignity and patriotism that I greet the patriotic, courageous and peace-loving people of our beloved country on this historic occasion – the celebration of our 32nd anniversary as an independent nation.

The National Celebrations Committee has chosen a very interesting theme for this year's celebration: "Promoting Growth, Stability and Poverty Alleviation". On the surface no patriotic Grenadian, whether at home or abroad, would have any difficulty appreciating the importance and timeliness of this theme. I fully support it.

However, I hasten to add that this theme should not be seen as another group of high sounding words with little, or no, practical effect, or meaning.

If we are to seriously promote growth, stability and poverty alleviation, it is imperative that we embark on a special programme to get rid of the deep-seated corruption, mismanagement and waste that have plagued our nation for the last 10 years of our independence.

The empirical evidence throughout the world, especially in third world countries, shows that corruption stultifies growth, creates the basis for instability, and heavily contributes to the poverty of the disadvantaged. Haiti, the first independent nation in this hemisphere, is a glaring example of this.

There's no doubt in my mind that if the many public sector programmes and projects, involving millions of dollars of taxpayers money, had gotten off to a proper start, with the necessary structures in place to deal with the fundamental questions of transparency and accountability, and if these same projects/programmes were not riddled with corruption and mismanagement and waste, our independent nation of 32 years would have been much better off today; the people would have benefited enormously, and their living standards would have been at a reasonably acceptable level, in spite of two disastrous hurricanes.

It is estimated that while there are thousands of people, old as well as young, who continue to live below the poverty line in specific areas of our independent nation, over the past several years approximately 240 million dollars in Eastern Caribbean Currency went down the drain as a result of corruption, waste and mismanagement. This is staggering and mind boggling! Pause

for one moment and think of the impact this sum of money, properly managed and directed, could have on alleviating poverty in our country. Could you imagine the number of our established schools that could have been renovated and modernized with some of these funds, so that our needy children would have better access to education; and the number of learning centers that could have been constructed in different parts of the country to bring more and more of the poorer sector of our society into the learning process!

Could you imagine the impact of some of these funds would have had on the establishment of a school books and uniform programme for the poor and needy, and thus helping to alleviate poverty!

Could you imagine if 30 million dollars were taken out of this 240 million dollars (that went into corruption, waste and mismanagement) and invested in the construction of a branch of T. A. Marryshow Community College (TAMCC) in the northern part of Grenada— the relief such a development would have brought to thousands of students in St. Andrew, St. Patrick and St. Mark, both socially and economically, not to mention, educationally! It should be borne in mind that in the poverty assessment survey conducted in 199, the parish of St. Mark was identified as one of the worst affected areas in terms of poverty in our independent nation. Surely, the people of Waltham and Coast Guard, for example, would have been in a better position to give their children a chance at further developing themselves at a higher school of learning, after completing their primary school education.

Could you imagine if some of these funds were used to assist in strengthening the School Feeding Programme— the enormous relief it would have brought to the many thousands of poor people children across Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique! Scores upon scores of people in our society are not able to send their children to school on a regular basis. They simply don't have the money to provide them with a lunch. We all know that children cannot learn on hungry bellies.

Could you imagine if some of these funds were used to upgrade and modernize the health clinics across the nation, and upgrade and modernize the hospitals in Mirabeau and Carriacou— what a tremendous service that would have been for our people!

Could you imagine if a sizeable portion of these funds— let's say 100 million dollars were pumped into the agricultural sector— what it would have done for the employment situation, and growth of the agricultural economy as a whole, and hence the reduction in poverty!

You see my dear people of Grenada, Carriacou & Petit Martinique— growth, stability and poverty alleviation have a symbolic relationship. Each feeds of the other.

So if there's growth in the agricultural sector, and the other productive sectors of the national economy, that would contribute greatly to peace and stability, and at the same time help alleviate poverty. The less fortunate in our society would now have jobs, would now have the material basis for earning a living, and would not be provoked into wrongdoings which could affect the orderly functioning of our society.

As laudable as this independence theme is, it would only have meaningful impact if a concerted, genuine, effort is made by those who control the levers of state power to involve all stakeholders in the process of nation building.

This means taking on board the ideas, suggestions, proposals, programmes and projects of civil society, with a view to utilizing them where necessary, and applicable, for the advancement of the well being of all our people.

It further means establishing the appropriate mechanism for transparency and accountability in public life.

IT MEANS THE PRACTICE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN ALL ITS MANIFESTATIONS.

In closing this independence message, let me extend warm and hearty congratulations to our 4 talented cricketers, Rawle Lewis, Devon Smith, Andre Fletcher and Neelan Pascal, who have been selected to represent the senior and under-19 West Indies teams, respectively, at the international level. This must be a proud moment for all of Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique. This is a moment for celebration. We wish them every success.

Let me also take this opportunity to extend warm and hearty congratulations to the Agency for Rural Transformation (ART) for the organization of the "3225 Calypso Concert", as part of our independence celebrations. This is a brilliant idea. Undoubtedly, our local calypsonians have made a tremendous contribution to the cultural development of our people over the past 32 years. Some of their work can be matched with those of their regional counterparts, including the Mecca of calypso— Trinidad and Tobago. There could not have been a better way and a better time to highlight the great creative work of our calypsonians.

Happy independence to all! God's Blessing!