

Remarks by His Excellency Anthony Thomas Aquinas Carmona ORTT, S.C. at the Ceremonial Opening of the First Session of the 11th Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on 23 September 2015

Members of Parliament, my Fellow citizens of Trinidad and Tobago:

After 29 years of Republicanism, how do we, as a people view “our democracy”? Democracy is not only a government of, for and by the people, but a government for all of the people, all of the time. This is what must be etched in your minds as Members of this hallowed chamber as you begin the work of the people. This, I suggest, must be your mantra, as servants of the people.

As we formally convene the 11th Parliament of our beloved Republic, I entreat you all who have taken the oath of office as Parliamentarians, not to squander the opportunity bestowed on you by the people through the exercise of their votes. I implore you to represent them not only as legislators, but also as representatives who would not adopt the posture of the absentee landlords from our colonial past, and only return to your constituents when you once more seek their suffrage at another election. You must not adopt the stance of being an absentee Member of Parliament in your constituency. You must remember always that you have assumed your privileged positions, as trustees on behalf of the people, not as proprietors of estates in fee simple.

Successive Parliaments, in their stewardship, have passed laws for the order, good governance and the economic development of this land, and despite its imperfections and challenges, we are proud to call this Trinidad and Tobago our home. Such affirmative pride is echoed by every citizen everywhere, from the man in Sangre Grande to the woman in Speyside, and the young people in Brasso Seco.

Today Members and citizens, I am going to talk to your hearts, a much needed conversation with the soul of the Nation. This is the essence of my intended dialogue. In each of our lives we have different philosophies we live by but I wish to promote in real terms the philosophy of genuine service, the benefits of national pride, service to people, community, the nation and the world. What therefore is your philosophy as a Parliamentarian? And this you must determine now at the start of your stewardship.

What new body of laws therefore would you the members of the 11th Parliament bequeath to our future citizens? Would you use your law-making powers to enact legislation for the sustainable development of Trinidad and Tobago solely based on myopic or parochial considerations? Or would you ensure that you introduce Bills which ultimately become Acts of

Parliament by seeking to situate the development of Trinidad and Tobago in the context of global norms and mores, which can be implemented directly or customized to suit our national situation?

Last May, when I had the honour and privilege to address the African Union Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, I listened attentively to Heads of State and Government of that great continent, embracing the vision for Africa's development based on the African Union's Agenda 2063. I was inspired by the focus that was being placed on the development of the Continent for the benefit of the peoples of that continent. The vision for the development of Africa calls for harnessing of its natural and human resources, but is also mindful of the synergies which exist in the world at large.

We in Trinidad and Tobago must also have a vision for our sustainable development in a world which continues to change ever so rapidly before our eyes, at every opportunity. Are we going to ensure that the laws passed by this Parliament take into consideration the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed to by the United Nations for a new development agenda for the next 15 years. These goals will replace the millennium development goals which expire at the end of this year.

It is my sincere hope that the post 2015 development agenda that will be adopted by world leaders at a summit which begins at United Nations Headquarters in New York this very Friday September 25, would influence our own development agenda for the next 15 years. We may very well need to revise and update our manifestos. These SDGs emphasize the importance of the social, economic and environmental aspects of development to the national development of States.

I have examined the SDGs and find them to be a useful and instructive benchmark on which we could centre our own development agenda. They seek to cater for the total development of the peoples of the globe and are as follows:

- 1) End poverty in all its forms everywhere;
- 2) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture;
- 3) Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages;
- 4) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
- 5) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
- 6) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
- 7) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all;

- 8) Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all;
- 9) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation;
- 10) Reduce inequality within and among countries;
- 11) Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
- 12) Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;
- 13) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;
- 14) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;
- 15) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage; forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss;
- 16) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and
- 17) Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.

As your President, I humbly suggest that all Parliamentarians familiarize themselves with all 17 of those goals and the numerous targets and indicators which have been agreed to by all UN Member States, including Trinidad and Tobago.

At the same time, I further humbly request that you pay greater attention to the passage of implementing legislation to give domestic legal effect to legally binding international obligations which flow from treaties and other international agreements to which Trinidad and Tobago is a State Party. As a country, ratifying or acceding to treaties is not enough. This 11th Parliament of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, should not allow five years to elapse without the enactment of legislation to give effect domestically to, for example, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the country ratified on 25 June of this year. Any failure to domesticate the provisions of this landmark Convention would impair in a fundamental way, the rights of some of our citizens who are differently-abled, but who continue to make an invaluable contribution to national development.

Ladies and Gentlemen, every successful businessperson has plans for the long term. And in our modern global economy, of massive international trade, capital flows and rapid technological change, long-term vision is crucial and prudent for adept sustainability. This is true for Governments as it is for business. Too often, our indigenous entrepreneurs are let down by the short-term views of Government. I remain positive that those trends will be reversed so that

they match the long term aspirations of our citizens. Citizens expect, nay demand, that those in leadership demonstrate a clear and unwavering commitment to the long term sustainable development of our nation.

This Republic does not exist in a vacuum. We are influenced by factors and forces over which we sometimes have no control. As the economists and businesspeople seated among us here will confirm, if you fail to participate in shaping the global economic system, you will be shaped by it and it is up to us to be proactive in managing this exercise.

We must get past the blame game and set the required course of action to transform our economy as necessitated by world economics. What we do have control over is our reaction and ability to adapt and transform accordingly.

This is the framework within which the 11th Parliament will be operating and their work- your work- will be instrumental and determinative in developing strategies to deal with the global and local challenges. But it is not all doom and gloom. We are a nation of innovation, strength and resilience but sometimes in governance, we can be myopic. The benefits of collaboration and cooperation among political parties with a view to solving national issues are often lost upon us.

Circumstances sometimes dictate that we break from the norm as demonstrated by the Commonwealth of Dominica. Recovering from the effects of Tropical Storm Erika, both the Honourable Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit and the Honourable Leader of the Opposition Lennox Linton have undertaken to combine their efforts via the National Reconstruction Advisory Committee which consists of all 21 Parliamentarians dictated to overseeing the rehabilitation efforts to ensure equity and transparency in the Commonwealth of Dominica. I daresay we can learn a much from the collaborative governance displayed by this very small, inspiring country.

I suggest that Parliamentarians constructively engage institutions, Office holders, individuals offering and obtaining advice rather than engaging in public posturing, brinksmanship and footworks when dealing with national issues.

Constructive engagement is also about 21st century international benchmark practices of political civility and comity where for example, congratulating two leaders, one conceding and one victorious of the respective political parties for the maturity displayed in the easy and fluid transfer of political power, cannot in law or in fact, amount to appointing either.

Constitutional reform must be transformational. 1962 Ladies and Gentlemen, is not 2015. Constitutional reform is mandatory. There are issues that have become quite prominent in our society. Procurement legislation and campaign finance legislation must be prioritised in this 11th

Parliament. As a side note, it is my intention to soon advertise locally, regionally and internationally for a Procurement Regulator under the present Procurement legislation.

We must remember, that as we move forward in this multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society we call home, we must pledge our unstinting allegiance to this nation of ours. We have to appreciate the many advantages that our diverse and unique society has afforded us, living side by side in peace and harmony, ever mindful that our natural blessings, constitutional freedoms and rights are privileges we must never take for granted.

This is not a time for recrimination and negative wrangling but a time for rallying all our troops to a common positive goal- where service to country carries both pride and joy, where the vulnerable and marginalised are not left behind, where there is enough to feed all and where hard work and industry are rewarded and encouraged. We need to give ourselves a chance to succeed but we can only do so if we share and commit ourselves to this single aspiration of a better T&T, one nation for all.

Why can't we all just get along? We can all get along because we must all get along, if we are to salvage and confirm the human legacy with which we have been bestowed by Pope John Paul II and Bishop Desmond Tutu, who referred to Trinidad and Tobago as the "rainbow Nation of the world".

It is not by chance that a few days ago the world celebrated World Peace Day and the timing could not be more perfect as we engage the transition from one government to the next. In the aftermath of election 2015, the comments on social and traditional media were disappointing in the extreme. This currency of hate and divisiveness has no place in our society. We should know better.

Perhaps, as a Parliament you could have been more proactive in implementing cyber legislation that could have well pre-empted those unsavoury comments in social and traditional media.

But it is not too late. And luckily, you have a good head start. In April of this year, Form 4 students from Naparima Girls High School, San Fernando, so disenchanted with the failure of the adult Parliament to address cybercrime, cyberbullying and general cyber misfeasance, garnered some 4000 signatures in support of their petition to address these issues and presented those signatures to the Office of the President. Honourable Members, I wish to publicly salute the youth activism of the Naparima Girls High School, San Fernando, for this progressive initiative and project by acknowledging Rebecca Ann Jattan, Chelsea Morrison, Emily Ramsubir, Melanie Baboolal, Alviya Mir, Syama Jivana Ramnarine, Sharvaani Rampersad-Mahara, Shivani Persad-Maharaj, Sarah Hayatoola and Priyanka Ramsubhag. I hope that their cybercrime initiative will come to life through the enactment of the relevant legislation in this Parliament.

Business as usual has to be a thing of the past. We as a people cannot, in good conscience, sit idly by while entire communities are under siege. You have only to open the newspapers, and some of us- our doors- to see and feel the debilitating effects of crime on our society. It is easy to lay blame at the doorstep of the incumbent government or the past government but we are all responsible, in more ways than one. There is a spirit of inhumanity that is sweeping through our nation, marked by a callous disregard for the sanctity of human life.

So ladies and gentlemen, Parliamentarians, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, what are we going to do about this quagmire we find ourselves in?

Well, we can start by reigniting that good old, trustworthy trait known as “respect”. Respect in our society is becoming an increasingly scarce commodity. There seems to be a general breakdown in basic good manners and respect across many spheres, even in this Honourable Parliament. The home should be a catalyst for change, a place where members show respect for parental authority, civil authority, and the law of God. Respect for authority should begin in the home, and carry over into the school, the workplace, the society and even this Parliament.

Trinidad and Tobago has had and continues to be faced with its fair share of tough decisions to make as regards crime, corruption and the threat of low oil prices. I have been advised that we ought not to panic unduly by these fluctuating oil prices. We have been in this business for over 100 years and we know the industry has frequent cyclical swings and also, every so often there is a market re-alignment that tends to have more to do with international politics than pure supply and demand mechanics. The signs point to the latter activity and with the application of appropriate and prudent measures our country will weather this storm and ready itself to take advantage of the next up-cycle.

Notwithstanding, this 11th Parliament is coming into being at a time when resources are constrained and yet still has to find a way to navigate these challenging waters. I have faith- I have deep faith, I have profound faith- that the men and women of this Parliament, if they truly work together, can overcome any and all adversity and lead the way in maintaining and improving life in this blessed Republic of ours.

In this spirit, I hope business leaders will get more involved in public policy issues. I think it is time for more of Trinidad and Tobago’s business leaders to step up to the plate and make their voices heard in areas that have a direct impact on the future of this country, particularly the longer term issues that we face as a country, not just the issues you believe are important for your business or for your particular sector. Governments at every level cannot undertake such discussions alone; and they cannot identify problems and propose solutions in a vacuum. The creation of good public policy needs business leaders’ perspectives and insights as well as those from other segments of society, as part of engaged and fully informed public dialogue.

In our quest to repair Trinidad and Tobago, we must decry this growing philosophy of mediocrity. Mediocrity of any form is unacceptable. Unfortunately, mediocrity seems to be the order of the day and in all spheres it seems that mediocrity is being accepted more and more as the norm. Quality service, value for money spent, treating customers fairly, respecting and honouring diversity, productivity and tolerance- they are all under siege. The solution to this mediocrity begins with the transformation of the man and woman in the mirror.

Distinguished Members, education is the key to sustainability because if any country wants to secure its place in a competitive global world, it has to develop its human capital.

An open and meritocratic education system is fundamental to establishing the standards of society – promoting and rewarding individual effort and commitment. It is the key to unleashing creativity, for which this country is famous, and the key to accessing the full potential of our people.

A strong system of higher education provides a community with leaders, building a sustainable research capacity in our education system. Our business sector is also expected to contribute and support the education goals of the government, specifically as it relates to high quality research in science and technology. Such a contribution is essential to the sustainable economic growth of any country.

We each must do our part in creating a culture of learning and motivational ambition among our people and it begins with the very young. As an initiative in this direction, I have monthly “Lunch with the President” meetings with young primary school students between the ages of 5 to 12. I also made a promise as Head of State to visit every single school in Trinidad and Tobago and I have since visited some 28 primary schools going from classroom to classroom, refusing to do school assemblies- the easy way out, to spread the message of hope, ambition and infinite possibilities in the lives of our school children, building self-esteem and a belief in themselves in terms of what is possible and probable in their lives.

As adults, we like to tell our young people what is required of them but we are not prepared to accept what they require of us. A youth Parliament with powers of intervention must be part of any rejuvenated Constitution. Until such time I will attempt to do what needs to be done. I have appointed 3 persons below the age of 40 and one in her late 20s as Independent Senators in this 11th Parliament. In passing, I also wish to mention that for the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, the Office of the President will be hosting a 2 day retreat/workshop to sensitise the Independent Senators of their duties and responsibilities in this Honourable Parliament.

I will continue in my clarion call for appropriate legislation to lower the age requirement to be in the Senate. A Constitution must provide for the exceptional young man or woman that

comes along in every generation. There was a young man under the age of 25 that I came across who can match strides with many of us in this august chamber and he could have been appointed by this President if that bar was not in place.

I considered a First Class Honours student who is visually impaired as a possible Independent Senator, but I was informed that it will take a year or so to put braille technology in place in the Parliament. But this President is not giving up. I draw inspiration from the visually impaired, The Honourable Kerry Ann Ifill, the President of The Senate in the Barbadian Parliament. How could I forget The Honourable Floyd Emerson Morris, fully blind since school age who persevered and obtained his Masters in Philosophy at UWI. In 1998 at the age of 29 he became a Senator and in 2013 became the President of the Jamaican Senate. We must inculcate in our society, in our Parliament, real and genuine inclusivity for all of the citizens in Trinidad and Tobago.

Yet all of us accept that Malala Yousafzai, that female activist in her youth has done far more for education youth and woman empowerment than many world leaders and politicians in and out of their respective Parliaments. Ladies and gentlemen, this is an era of enlightenment. Informational reservoirs are in abundant supply and the young are demanding their space and their inclusivity in governance as never before and rightfully so.

Let me tell you a little story about the influence of education, values and the power of the youth perspective in governance.

Last week when I was put on the spot in my office by a 17 year old about the need to amend the composition of the Privileges Committee, my first thought was that, as a nation, we must be doing something right- not because the Privileges Committee Rules do not need amending but because we are raising a future generation of young people who are not just involved, but passionate, about issues of governance, parliamentary procedures, independence and autonomy. Murvani Ojah Maharaj is a Sixth Form student of Hillview College and he was, along with his classmates and colleagues of other schools, invited to attend a Presentation of Credentials Ceremony for an Ambassador at the Office of the President as part of a youth initiative I implemented since I assumed office. This initiative affords our nation's school children a personal and up-close view of diplomacy, international relations and global democracy at work- matters normally reserved for adults in these august halls of Parliament and elsewhere.

The young man submitted convincingly that the Privileges Committee, comprised as it is of members appointed by the Speaker in the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate in the Senate, both of whom are themselves politically appointed, can well lend itself to bias or the perception of bias and political alliances and interests in making decisions about the conduct or misconduct of Parliamentary colleagues. That is Murvani's concern. And he mapped

it out in a comprehensive letter to me subsequently, to be conveyed to you, the Parliamentarians, if possible.

But there is a bigger, more lamentable picture that underlies this concern of bias, whether real or apparent, of the Privileges Committee. It is that even our young people are noticing the misconduct and misbehaviour of our country's leaders and parliamentarians. They are also noticing the blatant lack of consequences for such misconduct by our Parliamentarians.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran Pastor who ironically participated in the resistance movement against the Nazis, said "The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world it leaves to its children." Honourable Members, think about the Trinidad and Tobago we will leave to our children if we continue to throw stones at each other, in and out of the Parliament- on the radio and tv shows; if we persist in the tired insults and degradations of each other because one side does not agree with the other on a particular Bill or Policy, not on merit or demerit, but because of political and partisan allegiance.

Our young people are aware; they are paying attention and one day the young Murvanis will grow up and sit exactly in these seats of Parliament.

We often forget that our Parliament is the sanctum sanctorum of our democracy. It gives effect to our Constitution which guards our human and civil rights, liberties and responsibilities. The people of Trinidad and Tobago, those poorest, those wealthiest, those in-between, our young people- they all repose unflinching faith that our Parliament will deliver on their hopes, visions and expectations.

Honourable Members, if we recognise and re-establish for ourselves, the role of our Parliament as the sanctum sanctorum of our democracy, we are already on the right road. The urgency of now beckons. The time to get our actions right is now.

A better democracy, and indeed, better politics, mean debating issues not people; avoiding distorted truth, fallacies, conspiracies and if I may coin it, "emotional unintelligence" in our debates and rather engaging values, facts, principles and truth. I assure you the consequences of so doing will be the faster, more fluid and effective passage of progressive laws; harmony and decorum in our Parliament and perhaps most impacting, that each of you Honourable Members, will be exemplars of honour and statesmanship to guide and inspire our young people.

Call it the audacity of hope on my part, but I believe we can reform our conduct and give our nation and especially our young people something to look up to and believe in.

Conclusion:

Ladies and Gentlemen, Trinidad and Tobago as we stand here at the dawn of this new Parliament, the future is pregnant with possibilities. Even though the current scenario is difficult, we must be positive in our approach to hard work, focused effort, teamwork will put us on the threshold of a new era, one that is bright with the prospect of unlimited opportunities and challenges, along with the promise of continued reward. It is at times like these that you should reflect thankfully on the commitment, determination and dedication to duty of all of those who are here today and also to those who have gone before who have contributed to our success thus far.

As we look forward to the activities of this 11th Parliament I am sure citizens may be expecting to see more actions that serve to strengthen the governance structure of State machinery, enhance disclosure and transparency, and foster an atmosphere of high ethical standards and compliance. These measures will help to attract and protect investors, make the country more effective, and restore integrity to civil society governance.

Finally, to the Parliamentarians- many of you present here today must be aware that you are the human face of the nation's developmental thrust. You are therefore a crucial point of interface between State action and the population. That is why we are here today to give you this platform of positivity to kick off your deliberations that will contribute affirmatively to the future development of Trinidad and Tobago. To the many nay-sayers, I say broaden your horizons, think positively, have some faith, do good and be good.

You know, in the Bible at Matthew- Chapter 6, Verses 25 to 33: there is a saying of "oh ye of little faith" In that context, they are words of encouragement, not words of condemnation. It is in this spirit that I call upon all present and not present to join with us as we launch the opening of this 11th Parliament.

May God Bless You All. May you keep each other in your prayers and may God continue to bless this wonderful Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.