

**Address by His Excellency George Maxwell Richards, TC, CMT, PhD
at the Ceremonial Opening of the Second Session
of the 10th Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
Monday, 27 June 2011**

The Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister, Sen. The Hon. Timothy Hamel-Smith, President of the Senate, The Hon. Wade Mark, Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Hon. Mr. Justice Ivor Archie, Chief Justice; Cabinet Ministers, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Heads of Religious Organizations, the Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, Leader of the Opposition, Members of the Judiciary, other Members of Parliament, representatives of the media, other distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

Today, June 27, 2011, we have gathered for the Ceremonial Opening of the Second Session of the Tenth Parliament. It is a ceremony that gives occasion to consider the awesome responsibility that rests upon the shoulders of every single Member of Parliament, whether elected by the people or appointed otherwise, according to our Constitution.

I think it is a good place to start by asking ourselves whether Trinidad and Tobago, as we know it today, is the place that we want it to be. In other words, are we happy with where we are? Are we encouraged by what we have accomplished? Are we convinced that we are on the right path? A more fundamental question may well be: where are we?

I have no doubt that each one of us has answers for those questions and they will not all be the same. What is necessary is that we put aside our biases and try to be objective in our assessment of where we find ourselves, at this time in our nation's development and, more importantly, ask ourselves what are we doing about it. It is not my intent to attempt to provide or suggest answers. I am quite sure that each one of us has his own convictions, separation from which will not be easily accomplished.

At the outset, let me say what most of us accept, at least in an academic way, that every one of us, inside and outside of Parliament, has a responsibility towards the betterment of life here. However, understanding and recognizing individual responsibility is not automatic, and so it comes back to the question of leadership and corporate responsibility insofar as our institutions are concerned, whether these institutions are the Government, the family or the private sector.

There is, of course, a symbiotic relationship but our business today is to focus principally on what is happening in this place and how it impacts the lives of the people of this country. Both Government and Opposition have responsibilities in that regard, responsibilities which need no

explanation, on this occasion. And I believe that every Member of Parliament understands why he or she has a place here and needs no counselling and certainly no hectoring from anyone to understand it.

Nevertheless, taking stock is not a bad thing and it is indeed salutary to remind ourselves that we are not called to service by accident. The demands will always be greater than the accomplishments, but that does not give licence for the despair or complacency. It should, instead, encourage the necessary stretch that is required to reach our several goals, or most of the people's expectations, lest we forget.

How has the country done this past year? We have witnessed enthusiasm at almost fever pitch, if you will. Expectations have been high notwithstanding the global challenges which have persisted, from which we are by no means insulated, and perhaps we are finding our feet in a different kind of terrain.

While the passages have not been easy, we have seen positive movement in some areas, and there comes to mind immediately, the continuing recognition of tertiary education as an important means whereby a knowledge-based society can be developed.

The expansion of the GATE programme is but one major development in this regard. This is one of the programmes, having youth at the centre, which is critical for the development of the human resource base in the country. There are others, at different levels, such as YTEPP, providing skills training and other apprenticeship programmes which demonstrate a more inclusive attitude in the educational spectrum and which our country cannot afford to abandon or may do so at its peril. These programmes must be kept as they provide a necessary stepping stone from certain poverty to the possibility of a decent standard of living.

On the plus side, we are making strides in completing and initiating, where possible, our road networks in order to connect various points in our country. Bringing services to the people in a more efficient manner seems to be more evident or better known even as there is a stepping up of outreach from the centre to outlying districts.

Agriculture is being injected with new enthusiasm and this is particularly critical for us, given the persistent high food import bill with which the taxpayer is saddled; given also a tourism industry that continues to rely on food imports as a contributor to its survival.

We have what is necessary to turn around many of the negative situations in which we are living. While there will always be inequality in achievement among persons, there must be equality of opportunity and policy decisions must ensure that even-handedness and transparency are hallmarks in the effort to provide opportunities for a better standard of living particularly for the disadvantaged.

But over time, while we have heard encouraging statements, we have been embracing a policy of deferral in a matter that I should like to highlight and which I consider to be the extremely urgent need for us, as a country. That need, as I have said elsewhere, and on many occasions, is to focus increased attention on the non-energy sector, and, in particular, manufacturing and the application of platform or generic technologies such as biotechnology, nanotechnology and new materials in order to achieve a level of balance in our economic development and provide needed diversification to our growth. I emphasize that we do not have much time to do so.

As we all know, Trinidad and Tobago is endowed with petroleum and gas reserves which, in absolute terms, are miniscule and represent less than one third of one percent of the world's proven reserves. Significantly, however, we have been highly successful in monetizing these resources. Indeed, our country represents the world's very first gas economy in the sense that no other economy, developed or developing, has previously been created and continues to function successfully which is dependent on natural gas as opposed to the many others which are liquid fuel dependent. We have become a model for other gasproducing countries. This sector clearly has a life of its own but it will be limited in its future growth by the availability of our hydrocarbon resources.

We have heard it said, time and time again, that we must always be cognizant of the fact that oil and gas are wasting assets which must be used to foster, for the longer term, more sustainable economic and industrial activity in a diversified economy. The world is in the midst of a revolution in which knowledge has replaced physical resources as the main driver of economic growth. We in this country must therefore look for our future economic and social well-being to science, technology and innovation rather than solely to reliance on the exploitation of our fiscal resources, important though this may be in the short and medium terms.

Excluding our country's gas reserves which are classified as "possible" or "projected", there are current proven reserves estimated at approximately 20 trillion cubic feet (tcf). However, given the current reserves to production ratio, and assuming no further success in our exploration efforts, admittedly, the worst case scenario, Trinidad and Tobago has only a 10 to 12-year window of opportunity for development of the non-energy sector.

Given this situation, we must have the courage to break with traditional approaches and consolidate the role of science, technology and innovation in our development strategies. We need to buttress our recent large investments in higher education, particularly in the areas of science and technology, taking consciously into account the aspect of innovation. We must focus on key sources of economic growth, such as an advanced and state-of-the-art manufacturing sector which is founded on the use of new as well as established scientific and technological knowledge.

In this regard, a modern manufacturing sector must also acknowledge the potential role of existing technologies, especially generic technologies mentioned before, such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, new materials and the information and communications technology, which all have broad applications and impacts on the economy. Economic change is largely a process by which knowledge is transformed into goods and services.

Creating links between knowledge generation and enterprise development will therefore be one of our greatest challenges. It should be obvious that we must first generate resources before they can be allocated to priority areas such as social services, health and education in order to improve the lives of our people.

This is no time for reduction in investment in infrastructure. Focus should therefore be placed on improving infrastructural services as a foundation for technology, including public utilities such as power, telecommunications, water supply, public works, transportation and environmental protection.

I say this with a question in mind: is there indeed a scarcity of capital combined with an abundance of labour in Trinidad and Tobago? If that is so, what do we do, with a sense of urgency, when there is no “big machine” as someone put it, no Alutrint, for example, to absorb idle manpower? It is a matter worth considering.

We are yet to accomplish the kind of income distribution that makes for a more even standard of living throughout the country. Poverty eradication is still, or ought to be, high on the agenda. But any sustained programme to eradicate poverty must have at its core community development and appropriate government policies must be in place with that in mind.

There are some who say that our shortcomings, in this respect, reflect the fact that, over the years, we have betrayed the dream of those who fought for our Independence. They say we have embraced, instead, a pervasive cancer that has been eating away at the self-respect of most of the masses which constrains them to a life of dependency on the next “masa”. Some, particularly among our youth, have chosen what they consider to be their escape route by living on the wild side and taking, by whatever means, what is perceived to be their piece of the pie.

It is my view that an accelerated social revolution can take place, based on a concept of education different from that which many of us have to come to accept. It is a concept that breaks down barriers erected between classes on the notion that education at the upper strata, that is the university level, cannot relate to education of the masses, which is described as skills training of a more practical nature.

The teaching of the motor mechanics, carpentry, bricklaying, plumbing, dressmaking and tailoring, pottery, planting rice, other food crops, herbs and cocoa or any other skills, should be

used as a means of broader education, just as the intention in teaching of the arts and sciences at tertiary level should be to train individuals to think, not only to be certified.

When we all, policymakers, trainers and those being trained grasp that idea, success would be measured not only by the passing of examinations but by a better understanding of where our training fits into the wider and the more inclusive spectrum of national development. It is a concept that truly engages the intellect, whatever the choice of subject, consequent occupation and the social stratum of the individual, whereby all legitimate work is accepted as honourable. This can lead to the linking of towns and villages and the eradication of social insecurity, which, many would agree, leads to resentment.

This is not a task for the short term and engaging in it must mean that our vitality must not be sapped. It means also that the individual must not take precedence over the cause and policies so established that partisan preoccupations are not allowed to prevail. We keep hearing that Trinidad and Tobago belongs to all of us, yet, the evidence does not indicate that we have come away from the tendency to promote “our own”. Our policies and practices must reflect a determination to ensure equal opportunity for all of our citizens, regardless of political affiliation or any other subjective consideration.

Opportunity for all, enhanced productive capacity and productivity must be at the centre of our efforts to move Trinidad and Tobago from where we are to where we ought to be, given the resources with which we are endowed. With this in mind, managers must be committed to proper management and time must be devoted by supervisors to training those under their charge so that there is more knowledge of what is required rather than learning from mistakes. Without this kind of leadership, the best policies will fail.

“Our task now”, as John F. Kennedy once said “is not to fix the blame for the past, but to fix the course for the future” and, if I may add, in a paraphrase: with our eyes on the next generation, not the next election.

In closing, I wish all parliamentarians, Government, Opposition, Independent Senators and your support staff a most successful session.

May God bless our nation.