



Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States

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FEATURE ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

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ORGANISATION OF EASTERN CARIBBEAN STATES

AT

GRADUATION CEREMONY

UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

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LOOKING South: North: Or Both? The USVI : The Dilemma of Choice

His Excellency the Governor of the USVI; Excellency the President of the 28th Legislature of the USVI; Chairman and other Members of the Board of Trustees; President of the University of the Virgin Islands; Chancellor of the St Thomas Campus and other members of the Presidents Cabinet; Commissioner of Education; Acting Chairman, Board of Education; Representatives of the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College; University of St Martin and the College of the Bahamas; Student Speaker; Graduates of the Class of 2004.

It is a distinctive honour to address you, the graduating class of 2004 on what must surely be a momentous occasion in the evolution of your lives as you move from the world of students to that of work, with all the excitement, challenges and the opportunities implicit in this transition. It is with interest that I note that an integral part of the mission of the University of the Virgin Islands from which you will graduate here today is to "engage in advancing knowledge through research and public service particularly in areas which contribute to understanding and resolving issues and problems unique to the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean."

It is to this issue, that of your contribution to the social and economic development of this part of the world, whether you remain resident here, or make your contribution from distant shores, that I wish to engage your minds over the next few minutes, as we talk through those issues which in no small way will

shape your future and guide the contribution which you will make to the world around you.

Your Unique Role

Those of us resident here, in this corner of the world, go about our daily lives in a common geographic space called the Eastern Caribbean, comprising French, Dutch and English speaking populations. This space is relatively small by world standards, yet the sheer wealth of beauty and diversity in culture which it incorporates – the romance of our collective history, the talent which we have produced on the world stage, is nothing if not dazzling. The sharing of this space in common provides the vehicle within which we in this space can capitalize on this diversity of spirit and character and the things which we bring to the table individually, for our collective good.

As residents of small island developing states located in the Caribbean, yet linked geopolitically to the world's only superpower, you the graduates of the Class of 2004, have a unique character, one which positions you to play a rather strategic role in championing the cause of Caribbean development while playing a powerful role in bridging the cultural and value divide between north and south, between the interests of small island developing states and that of far more powerful partners.

Allow me to contextualize these thoughts and explore some thematic areas related to the concept of smallness, the principle of shared space, the spirit of integration and the rewards of the migration economy, all of which in some way or other, if you so choose, can provide the rather broad construct within which you will make choices with respect to the future which you shape.

The Question of Size & the Ties That Bind

With a population of 108,000 resident on three small islands, the notion of smallness is a feature of life in St Thomas, St Croix and St John. But, small is a concept which is relative. In this part of the world there are those which are even smaller: tiny Josh Van Dyke in the British Virgin Islands across the bay, with a population perhaps of less than 300, puts the concept of small size into real perspective. But small size has never been a construct which has limited the capacity for intellectual thinking in this region. St Lucian Nobel Laureates Sir Arthur Lewis and Derek Walcott, born on an island of less than 140,000 people, both leaned heavily on the "islandness" of their experiences, one to inform the magic of his literary prose and the vivid tapestry of his imagery, and the other to construct a theory of rural labour surplus in the context of the challenges of underdevelopment and the movement towards the modernization of productive structures. Another Caribbean genius, Bob Marley's "One Love" inspired by the consciousness of his own identity, has transcended national and cultural boundaries and gone on to become the global anthem for more than just a single generation of people around the world.

There is no denying however the fact that small islands such as these are intensely vulnerable, socially, economically, ecologically and, one might add, politically. However, these islands have also understood that in collective groupings lie the seeds to reducing their individual vulnerabilities on all fronts. At the current time, Caribbean islands are engaged in a range of initiatives - some political, others economic or institutional - with which to reduce their vulnerabilities and develop resilience, as a group.

Literally next door, the BVI represent the farthest westward extension of the boundaries of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States. With a population of slightly under 600,000, and a GDP per capita which ranges from USD40,000 – USD 3,600 – this grouping of 9 small islands, three of whom are non-independent territories, have a long history of cooperation, and have over the past several decades established the sub regional institutional architecture needed for integration at a higher level, that of an Economic Union.

At the current time, the OECS has a common currency, a Central Bank, a common judiciary and a Directorate for Civil Aviation. They have established ECTEL, an organization responsible for telecoms deregulation, joint diplomatic missions around the world, and an OECS Secretariat. Plans for OECS citizenship and passport, and formation of the Economic Union were further advanced at the 39th Meeting of the Authority which concluded in St Vincent & the Grenadines yesterday. This common identity provides for strength in numbers. It allows OECS Member States to represent their collective best interests in regional and international fora, as they collaborate strategically in protecting and promoting these interests.

The concept of shared space has provided the basis for OECS collaboration with closest neighbours. The OECS Council of Ministers of Tourism will be expanded to allow for the creation of an Eastern Caribbean Council of Ministers of Tourism to include the French and Dutch islands. The concept of shared space provided the basis two days ago in St Vincent and the Grenadines, for the signing of a historic Memorandum of Understanding between the OECS and the Government of Puerto Rico to facilitate collaboration in a number of strategic areas including air transportation, tourism, trade promotion, health,

education, agriculture and security, among others. Cooperation agreements have also been developed in multiple areas with both Guadeloupe and Martinique.

At an even wider level of concentric bands of influence, are other groupings which allow for countries in this region to protect strategic interests and negotiate effectively, as a group: Caricom, Cariforum, Caribbean Development Corporation Committee, and the Association of Caribbean States are among the major such groupings. Even wider groupings exist, such as the grouping of Small Island Developing States, known as AOSIS, which provides a forum for small islands to work together and negotiate with developed counties in an effort to implement the principles of the Small Island Developing States Plan of Action developed in 1994.

All this to say that there are a multiplicity of options which may allow you, as residents of the USVI to take your rightful place around the table of brothers and sisters from the Caribbean, in celebration of the Caribbeaness of your identity, and use these fora to further the development objectives of the region, and the social and economic development of SIDs, as a whole.

The Caribbean Identity

The ability to seize opportunities available by virtue of the Caribbeaness of character of the USVI is not difficult to accomplish, after all, in 2002, over 30.6% of the population in this country came from the other Caribbean islands. The small size which is so characteristic of these three islands is echoed vividly in the fact that some 72% of those who live here but were born in other parts of the Caribbean, or over 22% of the entire population, come from small islands themselves - the OECS

countries, with St Kitts & Nevis, Antigua & Barbuda, and Dominica with the highest levels of representation. Indeed at the current time five of the Senators in the USVI are OECS nationals. There are therefore many ties that already bind you in the USVI with your neighbours further east and south.

While the USVI is neither part of the OECS or of Caricom, the constant movement of persons between the BVI and the USVI for example, between Anguilla and St Maarten, between St Kitts and Saba, speak to other types of relationships which are equally strong and are based on personal and kinship ties and functional cooperation at all levels.

As residents of the USVI, it is these ties that bind and other accidents or quirks of history, that provide you with a world view which is dual in its sensibility: one which is northern, and the other intimately influenced by the reality of geography, which allows for the development of a particular spirit of character which is 'sympatico' to the small islanders of whom you are so much a part. It is this duality of character, with the attendant opportunities to play a role in both worlds which positions you - despite your size- to bridge the gap between the two, very much in the manner in which Belize, despite its geographic location in the heart of Central America provides an important bridge between the people of the English speaking Caribbean with whom it is historically a part, and the Central American countries with whom it also shares a common history.

This does not mean that you have to remain here, to make your contribution as a champion in the cause of smallness or as a vehicle for bring together peoples of diverse cultures. The effects of globalization and the technology which we have at our disposal, allow us unfettered access in many ways: we can now

work together regardless of where we live. "Talent that flies away" is simply no longer "lost".

The Migration Economy

The issue of migration is one which has sparked many scholarly debates with respect to the costs versus the benefits of the movement of skills and expertise away from home, in what has traditionally been referred to, as the "brain drain".

Migration in these islands has long been a source of our history, and a way of life. Islanders moved from home at the turn of the twentieth century to become the "Silver Dollar Men" providing the labour for the engineering feat of the time - that of canal building in Panama; later waves of migrants moved to the Caribbean coast of Central America to teach English and to build cross-country railways, others left to cut cane in Cuba and the Dominican Republic and now their descendants have returned home to the USVI, the BVI, Anguilla, St Kitts, Antigua & Barbuda, to claim the rights of ancestry. Islanders moved to North America and to England in the early 40's and 50's to take jobs in the transit system, replaced in the 1970's by those from the middle class of several Caribbean countries - Jamaica and Guyana being notable examples - moving north due to economic collapse back home. The 1990's witnessed a mass exodus of trained teachers and nurses from Caribbean islands to fill slots in the USA and UK markets leaving behind the specter of the so called "barrel babies" back home.

In more recent time, this extra- regional movement of labour has been complemented by dramatic growth in the wave of intra regional movement of labour, resulting in dramatic increases in the population of the BVI and other countries in the northern

Leewards. This movement is vividly reflected in tiny sound bites of daily life in many of these islands. Witness Antigua, for example. The parade of Carnival bands, now has a Spanish section, church service on Sundays is officiated also in Spanish, radio announcements are in Spanish, and lively baseball matches are being played with passion, on cricket fields, on Sundays, in many communities.

The Impact of the Migrant Economy

In the past the so called "brain drain", has been a source of grave concern for many countries as their best and brightest have moved away, yet all of these islands and most developing countries have benefited tremendously from this phenomenon, and technology now permits foreign-based migrant workers to contribute in diverse ways to the continued socio-economic development of their home countries.

The impact of the migrant economy has been phenomenal. In the year 2003, over USD 100 billion was sent back home in the form of remittances, by workers living overseas, a contribution which was 15% higher than the level recorded the year before. The 20 million members of the Indian diaspora, for example, scattered over 135 countries, poured USD15 billion into India in 2002, exceeding the much touted value of the software industry to GDP that year. The Latin America and Caribbean region was the area of the world which reflected fastest rates of growth, with remittances almost doubling from USD16 billion in 1999, to USD25 billion in 2002.

India, Mexico and the Philippines were the highest ranked recipients of remittances in 2002, while our neighbour here in the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic ranked 10th on the list of

major recipients in 2002. Indeed, in countries such as Mexico, remittances play a larger role than Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and are second only to oil revenues in terms of sheer economic importance. Jordan and Malaysia are among those countries also extremely dependent on this form of financial inflow. Nearer home in 2002, remittances contributed close to 25% of GDP for Jamaica, and averaged approximately 6-7% of GDP for many OECS countries.

Immigration is and of itself a major foreign policy and domestic issue. Host countries need to balance the need for young workers, (who usually bring with them higher rates of natural increase), without overwhelming social infrastructure and upsetting cultural norms, a matter of great sensitivity which we have seen in this part of the world. In the year 2000, the United Nations reported that the European Union would need 159 million foreign workers by 2025 as a result of a shortfall in labour force requirements due to aging population stock and declining birthrates.

This need for foreign workers has led several countries to regularize the status of illegal migrants who demonstrate that they can contribute to a country's productivity. Countries are themselves making provisions for the way in which the world of work has changed. Those who are the major providers of labour to other countries, are devising creative means of both packaging that labour and channeling remittances into productive enterprise. Both Malaysia and the Philippines have established Ministries to market foreign labour to other countries, and are actively training teachers and nurses for the overseas market. In an effort to steer remittance towards productive investments, the Philippines established a USD100m bond offering to overseas workers, while Mexico has a local and federal government matching programme for investments in infrastructure.

The Diaspora

Today the buzz is all about “deploying the diaspora option” as countries seek to capture the energy of their network of expertise outside their shores and as always, to attract them back home. Nationals living abroad represent a steady stream of ideas, innovation, experience and expertise. They force change and modernization even from a distance, invest money and demand higher standards back home.

South Africa, reputed to have one of the most active diaspora networks in the world, created the South African Network of Skills Abroad in 1998, with 2800 members in 60 countries. Non resident Indians were the driving force behind the establishment of the world class Indian School of business in Hyderabad, and formed critical liaisons with compatriots back home in starting the boom in software development, a move which has given India first world credentials in the field. Indeed India is expected to sell USD8.5 billion in services to the USA this year.

By the same token, China’s economic boom has in large measure also been fueled by its foreign based nationals who have raised venture capital and provided expertise. It is estimated that the Chinese diaspora has contributed almost 60% of that country’s Foreign Direct Investment in recent times, with the number of returnees to China increasing by 13% annually since 2000. In both of these examples, the diaspora and those who have returned, are contributing heavily to the development efforts of their countries - currently the two hottest economies in the world.

The phenomenon of outsourcing and the jobless recovery in the USA as productivity increases, apart from the war on terrorism, are among the most important issues being debated during the current presidential race, and many countries have developed strategic responses in return. One such response is the planned cybercity of New Songdo in South Korea, the most revolutionary attempt at city planning ever undertaken on such a massive scale. New Songdo is viewed as “the most audacious piece of real estate in the world” and “the world’s most technologically advanced city”, as it sets itself up as the gateway to China, and a haven for high end high-tech industries, and workers from around the world. Quality of life is not lost in the mix: New Songdo has incorporated 6KM of canals along the lines of those in Venice, street scenes from Paris, and the waterfront of Chicago in its plans.

Cyberjaya, also in south east Asia is another city based on the principles of high tech innovation and outsourcing.

What does this mean for you?

What does all of this have to do with you? Essentially what this means is that both at home and abroad, the opportunities to contribute to the world around you, are as diverse, as they are boundless. Perhaps at no other time have the rewards for hard work being more expansive or exciting. Where you live no longer dictates where you work, and what you contribute. Small size need no longer be a constraint. The world of technological innovation, and the language and architecture of globalization provide exhilarating opportunities around the world.

The larger economic space provided within the OECS Economic Union and Caricom’s single market and economy, both at your

doorstep, will provide you with the opportunity to ply your goods and services nearer to home, explore and give expression to your Caribbean identity and be as creative as you choose to be, as you bridge the divide between different cultures and values in a way that is unique and special. Here, in the USVI the principles of outsourcing, the offshore financial services sector and others which are technologically based offer immediate opportunities.

Alternatively, yours can be the contribution which is made from distant shores. The point is that, for this generation of graduates, the world is your oyster as never before. Yours is the future which you will chart; the opportunities are there for the taking. Those of you gathered here today have been far more fortunate than the generations who have gone before, to you therefore falls the special responsibility to do the very best that you can, and be the very best that you can be, with what you have. Yours is the privilege and the responsibility to consider learning to be a lifelong process, one for which graduation today marks not the ending, but just the beginning. The greatest laboratory is, after all, the world of life itself.

So - go out there and make your mark, secure in the grounding of your identity. Write the script for the future which you want and rise to the challenges which await.

May you soar.