

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Governors General for the Caribbean Region
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Introduction

Thank you very much for inviting me to address you at the start of what promises to be a thoroughly stimulating debate about our region and how we embrace the challenges and opportunities of the future with confidence.

This region, the Caribbean, has given me so very much. My family, my friends and now the opportunity to serve as the next Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

This is a crucial time as I prepare to take office at the end of the week, which is why I so value being here with you. I want to look, listen and learn. And I want to thank you for having me here.

Child of Caribbean

I'm a child of the Caribbean, born in Dominica, with a father from Antigua, right here in St John's, and a mother from the beautiful nature island of Dominica. It's a story that will be familiar to many of you with connections across sister islands.

But more than that, if you look at my heritage I am a classic Dominican in that I have a combination of so many different cultures. I am part Amer-Indian because my mother comes from the traditional First Nation people of Dominica, I'm part French, part African, part Scottish.

One of the privileges of coming from the Caribbean is we are a mix of the whole of the world. This region is a melting pot where the other parts of the world meet. I like to think we're little diamonds flashing with all these different colours, different faiths and different cultures.

I have not only this geographical diversity in my family, but diversity of faith too. My mother is a Dominican Catholic, my father is an Antiguan Methodist and if you know something about those two traditions you'll know that they are part of one larger Christian family but they're also different.

Those distinct identities are at play within my own family story. I think that is why I was brought up to celebrate difference rather than to fear it.

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Just look at our DNA. 99.9% of our DNA, of every single human being, is identical. It's the 0.1% that makes us male and female, black and white, short and thin or more traditionally built. I believe we should concentrate on the 99.9% which joins us. Then we can better understand the 0.1%.

By concentrating first on those things that join us, what you find is that the 0.1% then becomes fascinating and interesting and glorious. It becomes the diversity that we should celebrate not the difference we should fear.

Caribbean coming together

Coming together in unity has been one of the strengths of the Caribbean region. Take the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, coming together to pool risk and share prosperity, supported as it is by the Eastern Caribbean dollar, which remains one of the most stable currencies in the world.

We have seen the success of CARICOM, not least on mobilising the world recently on climate change, which I will say a bit more about shortly, together with the work of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) that should be a model for the world.

CDEMA is this region swinging into action, showing not just a solidarity for one another, but a strategic capability so often missing around the world. Our message has to be: organisations like CDEMA work, they should be emulated, and been seen as part of the solution.

The point is all of these examples show the Caribbean has done multi-cultural, multi-racial for many generations. It should be said, not originally through choice, but forced first through slavery, then indentured servants and now migration. But the result is now a region that is an amalgam of the international community. We find an echo of other 53 countries in the Commonwealth here in our region.

Whether it is Nobel prizes from Caribbean, our contribution to arts, sport, culture, for one small group of islands, of no more than 6 million across whole Caribbean, we've got a lot to be proud of.

The Caribbean can come together in celebration but it also needs to be there in times of crisis too. And one such crisis is the existential threat of climate change that presents real dangers for our region and our world.

Climate Change

I feel incredibly lucky because I was born on one of the smallest islands in the 53 countries, in Dominica. There are only 72,000 people in Dominica so I represent a large percentage of my country's population.

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I understand what it's like to come from a small island. I understand the existential threat that is presented by climate change. For us, it has been our lived experience for decades as the rest of the world has been in denial.

Just remember the names we know from Hurricanes past. David. Frederic. Hugo. Ivan. Sandy. Most recently it was Tropical Storm Erika in Dominica that left a trail of death and devastation in her path on the 27th August.

It affected 90% of our GDP and caused more than half a billion US dollars worth of damage. The infrastructural damage that was caused on that one day probably put Dominica back 20 years.

Let me just say a bit about calculating vulnerabilities. GDP cannot be the final arbiter of how countries are assessed. For example, Dominica saw a 4.5% increase in GDP last year, looking at the world today you would say it was "thriving".

Yet in six hours, tropical storm Erika wiped that away. I think together we need to have a conversation about how we look again at how international and development systems assess the needs of our region and others around the world when they are subject to that level of vulnerability totally unrelated to GDP.

For other people in other areas, that threat of climate change is something that is distant. For the Pacific, for the Caribbean, for the small independent developing states in these regions, it's a matter of life and death. There was a time when people thought of climate change as something for tomorrow, it was esoteric, it wasn't really real.

Last November in Paris was a wake up for all of those who hadn't taken this seriously. Finally, the global community came to the decision that we had to do something and that we had to do it all and all together.

It's worth taking a moment to remember how we got there, because this region led the world. The journey to that international agreement started in Barbados at the SIDS conference and then at CARICOM in July with the focus on a target of limiting global rises in temperature to 1.5 degrees.

At the time all the so-called experts said this was pie in the sky, that it could never be achieved.

Then we went to Papua New Guinea where there was a meeting of the Pacific Island Forum and there too they made a commitment to work together at Paris to try and deliver 1.5.

Then those 24 countries joined with the remainder of the Commonwealth when we went to Malta for the Heads of Government Meeting immediately before Paris.

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There was an agreement that 53 of us would commit to 2% with 52 of us saying 1.5 would be our aspiration. Countries like Canada that had been sceptical in the past came on board because they heard the voice of the small island states.

The 53 countries then went to Paris, united in our aims and active across the five different regions. We had members of the Commonwealth with one voice saying, “take this seriously.” And they did.

Put simply, the global climate change agreement could not have been done without the work started here in this region, taken to the Pacific and then carried through the Commonwealth to success in Paris.

Of course, there is still much to do. We need to think about how do we translate the commitment we’ve made in Paris into action and how do we learn from each other, how do we make it easier to look at the resilience we have to build in, the mitigation and how do we deal with the loss and damage?

Economically we have huge opportunities in the new green jobs that there are to develop the technologies of the future and generate opportunities for our young people.

Opportunities for the region

More broadly we need to build resilience in the region, to weave a stronger fabric that holds us all together. We may be small islands but the opportunities for this region are huge.

We need more programmes like SPISE – the Student Program for Innovation in Science and Engineering – which inspires gifted Caribbean high-school students who are interested in studying and exploring careers in science and engineering.

I’m with that great Bajan, Professor Cardinal Warde of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who rightly said: “I believe the next Google can be developed in the Caribbean.”

There should be no limit to our ambition for ourselves or our people.

As Her Majesty The Queen said at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta: “a nation's size is no measure of the moral strength of its people or its willingness to play a full part in the global agenda.”

Globalisation can be seen as a negative force, but for our young people it can also be a great opportunity to share skills with world, for distance learning, and developing talents.

We have to think, well what are they going to do, how are we going to educate, how are we going to skill, how are we going to nurture, what are we going to do

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to enable that young population to take advantage of all the talents that's within them? And we are going to have to do that together.

To be truly wealthy we have to invest in the social capital of all of our countries and to do that, we need to look at the choices and chances available for all of our citizens.

We can't afford to lose the skill, the energy, the passion of any of our people because we have to invest and build that social capital if we want long-term health and wealth to be assured.

Conclusion

I was brought up to believe that every single one of us, no matter where we come from, we have a talent and it was our job to find that talent, to hone it and then to use it for the benefit of other people. That's what I've tried to live my life by.

Anything I have achieved has been through God's grace and because I have my Dominican mother on one shoulder, and my Antiguan father on the other. The proudest moment I ever have is when people say I am my mother and father's daughter. For me, that's the biggest accolade I will ever have.

I am extremely proud of being their daughter. I am extremely proud to come from the Caribbean. I'm extremely proud to be embarking on this new journey as Commonwealth Secretary-General because together we can achieve so much for our region and our world.

I look forward to meeting with you all over the next few days. Let's dream big dreams. And then set about the hard work of delivering them.

Thank you.