

ADDRESS

By

Hon. Philip J. Pierre

Prime Minister of Saint Lucia

at the

Opening Ceremony of the

43rd Regular Meeting of the CARICOM

Paramaribo, Suriname

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Salutations

I bring you greetings from the government and people of Saint Lucia.

I speak to you today as one of the ‘newly elected’ Heads of Government, grateful and honored for the opportunity to address this important body at such a critical time in our collective history.

An Increasingly Uncertain World

Colleagues, Madame Secretary General, I am sure you will all agree that there has been no other moment in our post-independence history, under whose cloudy skies we are currently seeking shelter, which has challenged our collective existence.

We are now experiencing the full brunt of runaway price increases for basic items such as fuel, flour and bread, compounded by supply chain issues. The Russia-Ukraine war has left the entire world reeling from rising inflation, making life for most households very difficult, more so for the people of our region.

I recently had to convene a special meeting of my cabinet to discuss the price of bread in Saint Lucia; this is how serious and attentive these times have demanded.

At this time, Madame Secretary General we are still reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which brought with it business closures, loss productivity, reduced tourism arrivals and the reduction in government revenues. The demands

on our public health system, which we shouldered to keep our people safe and the provision of social protection and support measures for vulnerable citizens have left governments of the region with very little fiscal space to move ahead to grow their respective economies.

And all of this has followed from at least two decades of external shocks, from the slowdowns and attendant security costs stemming from the September 11 2001 terrorist attack on New York City, and the global wars which followed these attacks, to the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis stemming from the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the US.

Mr. Chairman, in between these economic and geo-political man-made crises, we have had to confront the natural annual cycles of cyclones and hurricanes, a feature of our environment, which in recent years have become more ferocious, destructive and erratic. In my recent address to the Summit of the Americas, I made the point that while the *world only hears of the major weather events because of international television coverage, there are persistent small events brought about by average rainfall that cause significant damage – often manifested in landslides and flooding – and in the process impose additional severe strain on our island’s already limited financial capability.*

Sadly, Mr. Chairman these destructive weather events are the results of climate change for which we are not the offenders. So fellow Heads, given all of these realities, you will appreciate why the euphoria of an election victory vanishes quickly upon occupying the seat of the Prime Minister, because the challenges we all face as new leaders, upon sober reflection, are very apparent and in a word: daunting.

Optimism In The Role of CARICOM

Mr. Chairman, notwithstanding those dangerous winds, Saint Lucia's faith in CARICOM remains strong and unshaken. Saint Lucia continues to believe in the potential strength and protective shelter that CARICOM can provide. I witnessed firsthand the collective strength of CARICOM during the recent negotiations at the Summit of the Americas last month.

I want to assure you that I come to the Prime Ministership of Saint Lucia in the firm and abiding belief in CARICOM. Mr. Chairman, my regional philosophy has been shaped by the small population and territorial size of the country that I lead, but I stand here to affirm that Saint Lucia will always be less than it can be without CARICOM.

Whenever we are faced by external challenges not of our own making, I am always guided by the words of the late Prime Minister of Barbados Owen Arthur that “*we should face it and fix it.*” I am also always guided by the warning of our respected colleague, the distinguished Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, that we should avoid the reflexive *learned helplessness* which arguably stems from an inherited colonial consciousness. So, colleagues, I intend to use the responsibility that the people of Saint Lucia have placed on my shoulders to engage constructively with you and the CARICOM secretariat and to draw on your collective experience to advance the cause of CARICOM. In this regard, I pledge to engage energetically within CARICOM.

We have already signaled our intention to be fully aligned to the Caribbean Court of Justice as the final appellant Court in both civil and criminal matters. In this regard, the Government of Saint Lucia has written to the Privy Council expressing this desire. At home we have formed a Committee led by a respected jurist to continue the education of our people on this important issue.

The CSME

We must not allow our enforced circumstances of day-to-day survival to dull our memories of the reasons why our past leaders pursued the establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, and why they saw it as the most optimum

answer to the question of “what is the next stage of Caribbean development”, in light of all the global changes that had taken place in the decades since the initial treaty which established CARICOM.

At the centre of the thinking behind the CSME was the need to create the conditions for the free movement of people and capital and the need to establish a single economy as a unified space for joint growth and development for Caribbean businesses and more importantly for the improvement of the quality of life of Caribbean citizens.

It should also be recalled that at the centre of the CSME was a recognition that issues of governance in terms of the functioning of the CARICOM Secretariat had to be reworked to facilitate the implementation of decisions and the day-to-day management of the CSME.

Colleagues, it is fair to say that other than the energies which have gone into the pursuit of the single economy at the OECS level and the establishment of the Caribbean Court of Justice at the wider CARICOM level, we have not seen the kind of advances towards the CSME within CARICOM as we had hoped. As we continue to face the new and emerging challenges of food shortages, the rising cost of basic foodstuffs, climate change, youth unemployment, gun violence and crime, and other social challenges, I urge that we reframe our responses within the framework of the CSME.

I also urge that we engage in a thorough inventory of the work of the various CSME working groups, so that we can re-assess where we are and what is to be done to move the regional economic and political unification process forward.

Alongside these assessments, St. Lucia pledges to work within the OECS to advance the unification process within the sub-region.

Concrete Technical Action

Colleague Heads, Saint Lucia believes that without concrete technical action in response to the challenges that we face, we will see a deepening of the crisis, and we will have no one but ourselves to blame for not devising the appropriate responses.

We have complained for too long about the need for special and differential treatment given our vulnerabilities as SIDS. We have demanded too often that our graduation into middle income status should not be used as a basis for denying us access to concessional financing reserved for the world's poorest and most Highly Indebted countries. We have made our voices heard loudly and clearly on the need for our climate vulnerabilities to be included in the global commitments to the financing for climate change adaptability and recovery.

For all these reasons, Saint Lucia is pleased with and fully supportive of the efforts of the Caribbean Development Bank to develop a *New economic model as a means*

of measuring National Income - Multi Vulnerability Index Resilience Duration Adjuster.

We are fully cognizant of the need for such new tools to allow us access to development finance and Debt forgiveness since most of our debt have been the accumulated result of factors beyond our control, like climate change, wars, global financial crises and global pandemics.

We urge and encourage our regional technocrats, CARICOM included, not only to develop these new tools, but to undertake the necessary negotiations to convince the international financial institutions of the need to adopt these new measurements in the evaluation of the economies of CARICOM States.

Our regional technocrats and intellectuals must continue to re-evaluate and refine the models being used to assess our economic and social progress and should be prepared to spend more time in gaining greater insights into the nature of the region's challenges and in the development of models that are better able to assist us in advancing our countries economical and socially. This region has the intellectual wherewithal to devise new and innovative models and strategies for our economic development.

Regional Transportation

Colleagues, there can be no meaningful integration without free movement of people, and so we must move swiftly to create a lasting reliable and affordable regional transportation infrastructure. We have allowed our discussions on Caribbean sea and air transport to be guided too much by external market forces rather than by the transportation needs of the people and businesses of our region. In doing so, we have not only closed our air and sea spaces for business expansion and growth for our own local investors, but we have also surrendered the future of our unification projects to the whims of service providers whose only interest is profit. To put it directly colleagues, CARICOM needs LIAT or CARICOM needs a better version of LIAT. Unless one of our island-owned carriers emerges as a truly regional carrier, not only in terms of countries covered, but with a philosophical commitment to making regionalism work for CARICOM citizens, then our regional aspirations will continue to be an elusive dream.

In this regard, I wish to commend our Antiguan colleague Prime Minister, Gaston Browne for his efforts in keeping LIAT alive. Saint Lucia, therefore, stands willing to work with CARICOM to find solutions to our regional transportation challenges, and will assist in any effort designed to finding a lasting, reliable and sustainable airline or consortium of airlines, to service the region.

Saint Lucia will also be interested in a ferry offering scenic and comfortable service to utilize the potential of our sea routes as an additional attraction and transportation option for visitors and citizens alike.

Saint Lucia is committed to any effort by CARICOM to find a willing aviation investor to offer dedicated airline services between Africa and the Caribbean.

Saving Our Youth: The Youth Economy

Colleagues, there can be no CARICOM future if the young people of our region continue to wallow in despair, dashed expectations and apathy and with crime and gun violence as their most available option. In Saint Lucia, I have made the development of the Youth Economy one of the most important pillars of my development plan for the country. I see this not only as an economic imperative but a moral one.

In Saint Lucia, we are determined to create a special space for youth entrepreneurship and business growth within the general economic system. In that space they will be provided with state resources to help them convert hobbies into entrepreneurship and skills into businesses through finance and marketing support, training and mentorship; thus creating sustainable livelihoods and a new cadre of indigenous business people. A dedicated agency that is agile, flexible and responsive is being created to drive this policy.

I stand ready to work with CARICOM to see how we can organically link our development of the youth economy within the existing CSME and other economic and social development mechanisms within CARICOM.

External Relations

Colleague Heads, our integration will remain continually weakened if we allow the basic principles which has defined our relations to the outside world to be compromised by the foreign policies of other countries.

CARICOM is strongest when it holds steadfast to the traditional principles of the right to self-determination of all countries, the non-interference into the internal affairs of sovereign nations, the safeguarding the Caribbean region as a zone of peace and the pursuit of South-South cooperation.

Saint Lucia declares its readiness to defend and uphold the principles which are in conformity with the freedom and dignity of the Caribbean peoples, respect for the internal sovereignty of our neighbors and its pursuit of a foreign policy framework that allows it to tap into the development potential from regional friends, while avoiding making enemies with our longstanding traditional global allies.

Saint Lucia believes that a free, sovereign and economically stable Cuba, Venezuela and Haiti can only mean a free, sovereign and economically stable CARICOM.

My Expectations as Prime Minister

Colleagues, when I was elected as Prime Minister of Saint Lucia, I came in on a promise to be transparent, to be a listener, to be democratic, and to practice as much as possible the principles of Servant Leadership.

I have pledged to be guided by the principles of humility, transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and fairness to all and to put the development of people above everything else.

I pledged to use my best efforts to eradicate corruption at all levels.

Colleagues, as it is for my domestic political life in Saint Lucia, so I believe it should be for CARICOM. As we strengthen our democracies forty to sixty years after independence, let us all commit ourselves to the principles of good governance, constitutional reform, transparency and accountability, and let us strive to make this region the freest, most democratic and best governed part of the universe, all in the best interest of the people of the region we have been called to serve.

My expectations and dream as a new Prime Minister in CARICOM are for the attainment of genuine togetherness and integration of our foreign and economic policies.

My dream is for a flexible and agile CARICOM, serving the day-to-day needs of our people and enhancing their faith in our collective destiny.

My dream is for a CARICOM that never forgets that the only reason why we have committed ourselves to public life, is to serve the people and so we must put the people first in all that we do.

I would like to close with some borrowed words of wisdom. They are the words of the 1987 Nobel winner for Peace, Oscar Arlas Sanchez of Costa Rica.

I quote: “Hope is the strongest driving force for a people. Hope which brings about change, which produces new realities, is what opens man’s road to freedom.”

My friends, let’s be honest and acknowledge that CARICOM’s image throughout our region needs to improve.

That must change, and change now. Too much time has already been lost. We must begin that vital change by being the change the people have for a very long time been crying for.

We must not only talk unity. We must demonstrate to our people that we are together confronted by similar problems that can be resolved only by a United CARICOM.

I thank you.