

## Address to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Port of Spain, Trinidad, November 27, 2009

Mrs. Eleanor Jones was invited by Mrs. Babli Sharma wife of the Commonwealth Secretary-General to address the leaders' spouses at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago on Friday November 27, 2009.

Mrs. Jones presentation spoke to Partnering for a more Equitable and Sustainable Future – Leadership, Governance and Environmental Diplomacy. Her presentation is featured below:



Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured and humbled at this wonderful opportunity to share some thoughts with you at this Special Luncheon of CHOGM. Allow me to add my Caribbean welcome to you special delegates from the many Commonwealth countries around the world. My Caribbean colleagues I greet you warmly.

The small state of Great Britain exercised tremendous reach and power as she expanded her Empire into the far corners of the world. Many of these former colonies remain today as members of the Commonwealth of Nations, but as sovereign states from the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, New Zealand, Australia. There are some 53 member states with about 2 billion persons or 1/3 the world's population.



The issue of poverty looms large in several member states and it is reported that the Commonwealth is home to 80 per cent of the world's poorest people, and some of the richest. It has some of the highest rates of inequality in the world; some two-thirds of the very poorest members of these societies are women. These statistics speak to the challenge and the responsibility for leadership within this association of states. They speak to the need for a determination to understand some of the underlying factors about which we can strive to make a difference.

We share commonalities of a diverse history and experience, and today we seek new mutualities through a search toward ***Partnering for an Equitable and Sustainable future*** – the theme of CHOGM 2009.

CHOGM we have been told is held every two years to review global political and economic developments, and to review the work of the Commonwealth in support of members' interests. How do we emerge from the whirlwind of the unprecedented multi-faceted global crisis -

economic, financial, environment, energy, and food crises? What path must we pursue? How do we travel?

The Government of Trinidad & Tobago in its concept paper for the CHOGM 2009 articulated a vision for the Commonwealth. That vision is for Commonwealth nations to focus on a multi-pronged strategy anchored on three pillars:

- promoting sustained economic growth
- eliminating extreme poverty and reducing inequity
- developing urgent responses to climate change

The concept paper further highlighted the Commonwealth as having been exceptionally effective in bridging differences. It has a strong tradition of building consensus and strengthening cooperation. This strength is based on its diversity and shared commitments and should now be harnessed to encourage stronger partnerships within and with all development partners including civil society and business. The recognition that the current global crises are fundamentally inter-linked, points to the urgent need for an integrated approach to their solution and a genuine reaffirmation of the Commonwealth's commitment to sustainable development. The Commonwealth is urged to build on current work and to focus on the poorest countries.

The theme of partnership and interdependence has been pervasive in many international deliberations. In April this year the Fifth Summit of the Americas was held



here in Trinidad and the discussions were guided by "a renewed spirit of cooperation, integration and

solidarity... to improve the social, economic and cultural well-being of all our peoples by advancing joint solutions to the most pressing challenges..." This meeting resulted in the adoption, by consensus, of the Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain, which centres on human prosperity, energy security, climate change and sustainable development as interdependent pillars in securing the future of the citizens of the Americas. Faced

with global crises that no one country can tackle alone, the emphasis has to be on adopting an integrated approach to finding joint solutions.

A few months later, June 17, was observed as World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought. It has been clearly stated that the issues of desertification and drought are of specific relevance to CHOGM. Citizens of Commonwealth countries in East and Southern Africa are among the 11 million people now struggling with severe drought. In the north of Nigeria roughly 350,000 hectares of land are lost yearly to desertification, while in India desertification is likely to affect one tenth of the country's land surface.



Several reports conducted by United Nations agencies state that one-third of the earth's land surface, which is 4 billion hectares, is threatened by desertification, with over 250 million people directly affected. These reports also note that 24 billion tons of fertile soil disappear annually. From 1991 to 2000 alone, droughts have been responsible for over 280,000 deaths and account for 11% of the total water-related disasters.

The impact of climate change is already being felt – exacerbating these conditions of drought and desertification.

The UN *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction* published in May this year (2009) re-emphasised the role of climate change as a driver of risk given the increasing hazard and decreasing resilience in many countries. The Report further underscored the need for linking policy and governance frameworks for disaster risk reduction, poverty reduction and climate change adaptation and for bringing the approaches into the mainstream.

As we stand on the cusp of the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (192 countries to be represented) - we are receiving increasing reports on the accelerated pace of glacial melting and the slim chance that a "deal will be sealed". Large emitters in the developing world are slow to sign on. Coal fired plants in China cannot be

outside the impact of Antarctica glacial melts. However, while countries may not be signing on to international agreements we are heartened by the successful steps being taken at the sub-national level and by business.

The theme and focus of CHOGM is therefore very timely in that there can be little reduction in poverty, or sustained economic growth without an urgent response to climate change. The approach should be that of partnering to attempt to reduce glaring inequities and I humbly submit further that what we are talking about is **Informed and Enlightened Leadership, Effective Governance, and Environmental Diplomacy.**

So here we are in the Commonwealth Caribbean? What are the issues with respect to environmental sustainability, poverty reduction, economic growth, sustainable prosperity?

This Caribbean, which is as distinctive as it is diverse, is described as having the most exaggerated hazard vulnerability in the world in terms of climatic events. The Caribbean is the most highly indebted region in the world, and one of the contributory factors is the recurring saga of extreme natural events which derail macroeconomic policy and strategy, livelihoods, and social infrastructure.

The vulnerability of the region is two-pronged – it has been as much imbued as created: imbued by virtue of location and created by choices at the level of the individual, by public policy (or lack thereof), culture history, and by global events.

Natural hazards are **Hydrometeorological** - Storms, Hurricanes – wind, flooding, storm surge; floods; droughts. And they are **Geophysical** - earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, volcanic eruptions.

### Antarctic ice loss faster than thought

Vulnerabilities arise from the hazards themselves, but more importantly from human



behavior. Small size, land use, settlement patterns and livelihoods, are key parameters, and the natural protective resources have been degraded or decimated. Economies are fragile and there is generally inadequate understanding of the key issues. Damage, dislocation and loss, is rife - multi-island, multi-hazard, multi-year. The year 2004 is regarded as a watershed for Caribbean disasters in terms of the multi-island, multi-strike damage and loss sustained – Grenada, Cayman, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and others to a lesser extent.

Are these disasters due to the events or are there issues of governance? Global systems underlie the natural processes but the response is often influenced by anthropogenic factors.

Natural systems include location in the tropical Caribbean, Plate tectonics,



atmospheric and oceanic circulation, global warming and climate change. The climate change scenario for the region indicates temperature increases of 1-4 – 3.2 degrees C; sea level rise will vary across the Caribbean but an average is predicted at 0.18 – 0.59. Changes in ocean acidity, increases in hurricane intensity, increased flood events, and decrease in summer rainfall for Greater Antilles are all in the forecast. The impact is far reaching for the people and economies-tourism, agriculture, settlements, and health.

Disasters are described as failed development! So we broke it! We must fix it. Can we partner as exhorted by the theme of CHOGM?

There have been several attempts at partnering in the Caribbean, and the results have been mixed. There is an over-arching insularity among Caribbean states. I'd like to share with you an interesting perspective from Tom Friedman that perhaps helps to explain that insularity. In explaining the new challenges of globalization and the need for balance and the need for partnering, Tom Friedman draws the analogy between the Lexus and the Olive Tree. The Lexus is cutting edge: trailblazing, advanced technology, breaking

barriers - the wave of the future! The Olive Tree represents everything that roots us, anchors us, identifies us and locates us in this world—a place called home. .... We fight so intensely at times over our olive trees because, at their best, they provide the feelings of self-esteem and belonging that are as essential for human survival as food in the belly. Indeed, one reason that the nation-state will never disappear, even if it does weaken, is because it is the ultimate olive tree—the ultimate expression of who we belong to—linguistically, geographically and historically” (Friedman, 1999). Yet, if we fail to balance the “world without borders” with those “roots” we’ll be left behind - A message for the Caribbean, and indeed for us all because we are talking about human nature.

So complex a world we are in that Friedman further suggests an approach which he describes as “information arbitrage”. He says “the traditional boundaries between politics, culture, technology, finance, national security and ecology are disappearing. You often cannot explain one without referring to the others, and you cannot explain the whole without reference to them all. We need “Information arbitrage” – we need to take the disparate perspectives and then weave them all together to produce a holistic picture of our respective countries, regions and indeed of the world .

An example of a meaningful framework for partnering, for “information arbitrage” has been developed under the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). It is the strategy for Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) being guided by the Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA). Several international and regional partner governments and agencies have supported the development of the results-based framework “To strengthen regional, national and community level capacity for mitigation, management, and coordinated response to natural



and technological hazards, and the effects of climate change”.

So in going forward, the Caribbean platform for building resilience, reducing underlying risk factors and putting “people at the centre “ should be the plank on which to build a more equitable and sustainable future.

There is an imperative to relate to the changing tempo for sustainable development. To be effective we have to build that capacity for change from wherever we sit – change through Informed and Enlightened Leadership, Environmental Governance and Environmental Diplomacy.

Managing all of these strands will require powerful new multilateral efforts and serious public/private partnerships combining government, business, and civil society. We have to adjust our lenses to view these multidimensional and complex issues.

We need partnerships among the best of government, the best of business, and the most pragmatic civil society organizations. We will require enlightened leadership from all parts of society. How liberating and exhilarating it will be to lead toward the light!