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Address by His Excellency Professor George Maxwell Richards TC, CMT, Ph. D, President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the Opening of the 21st Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth, on Monday 9th January, 2012, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Port of Spain

May I add my own welcome, on behalf of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago, to our visitors who have come from many distant lands and do us honour by their presence.

Fourteen years ago, Trinidad and Tobago had the pleasure of hosting the biennial Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth and I am pleased that I can be among you, on this, the second occasion on which we are hosts.

The objectives of this Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth are most appropriate, including, as they do: *“The maintenance, fostering and encouraging of impartiality and fairness on the part of Speakers and Presiding Officers of Parliaments; the promotion of knowledge and understanding of parliamentary democracy; and the development of parliamentary institutions.”*

I believe also that the topics upon which you have agreed for discussion, in your four workshop sessions, will go a long way in helping you to fulfil these objectives which are critical to the continued development of all of our countries, small and large.

Although you, the participants in this Conference, are well aware of these topics, I crave your indulgence in rehearsing them for the benefit of those among us who are invited guests and not participants. They are, in sequence, as follows:

The Role of Parliamentary Diplomacy in the Era of Globalization

Executive Accountability: Oversight Role of Parliament

Emerging New Challenges for Speakers: Multiparty Chambers and Minority and Coalition Government

Parliamentary Service and its Management: Strengthening the Independence of Parliament

It is inevitable that adversarial politics will play itself out in Parliament, as both sides seek either to maintain its advantage based on majority, or to demonstrate that the electorate made a serious

error in rejecting them. Differences may be expressed in a civilized manner or may be the cause of rambunctious, if not hostile behaviour.

With that in mind, one may regard as necessary the accustomed repartee that has been associated with debates in the Parliament. What would sittings be without it, when one considers the weighty responsibility that comes with representing the people's interest? It takes the edge off acerbic remarks which might otherwise do serious damage to peace, in the august chambers of Parliament. As many of us may have observed, modern technology has exposed, for all the world to see, incredible physical assault, in other places, when passions become uncontrollable, to the amazement, I am sure, of all of us in the Commonwealth, who are accustomed to using words as the weapon of choice, rather than fists.

Arbiters in Parliament, which in some way describes the role of Speakers and Presiding Officers, are necessary and palpably impartial ones, at that. Every representative, elected or appointed, must have the assurance that political bias will not prevail in the conduct of parliamentary matters. It is unreasonable, however, to expect that Speakers and Presiding Officers will be absolutely free of personal political choices - almost every citizen or observer has one - but there ought to be no accommodation, whatever, of partisan behaviour, on their part.

It is necessary for Speakers and Presiding Officers to ensure that rules are observed and that order is maintained in their respective Houses. But this is not an end in itself. While it is clear that chaos must not be allowed in the conduct of the Parliament, keeping order cannot be the principal objective.

Orderly conduct is to be expected in any civilized society, particularly in what is regarded as the highest forum in the land. Moreover, bearing in mind that there are public galleries in our Parliaments, seemly behaviour must be the norm, whether or not sittings of Parliament are broadcast live. This must be so, for a number of reasons, not least of them being the example that ought to be set for the rest of the society and especially our youth.

This is neither the time nor the place for narration of the history of the Westminster system which has guided the Commonwealth. Suffice to say that Commonwealth countries have adopted that system from a country which has pioneered Parliamentary government. It is a system that we have used, not always in its strictest sense, but rather conveniently, to pursue governance of our peoples.

The oversight role of Parliament is critical to the governance structure in countries that have chosen the democratic form of government such as the Commonwealth. Accountability is a duty that a government has to its people. It is a duty that is shared, in fact, by all members of Parliament, whether elected by the people or appointed. The responsibility of Speakers and Presiding Officers should therefore be seen in this context.

Whatever the challenges - minority governments or coalition governments - it is a matter of ensuring that the business of the Houses of Parliament is so conducted as to assure the people that their legitimate expectations are not frustrated. The rules of conduct, the order to which I referred earlier, must all cohere towards this end and fairness must prevail.

We must ask ourselves what was the point of seeking Independence. What did pioneers such as Nehru, Nkrumah have in mind in leading their countries to independence in 1947 and 1957, respectively, seeking Republican status, at the outset, in the case of India and subsequently, in respect of The Gold Coast? It is interesting to note, for example, the part played by the Honourable East India Company, in the history and development of the Indian Subcontinent and in the growth of the British Empire.

A powerful force in the world for over two hundred and fifty years, of particular interest is the political power which officers of the Company wielded in the British Parliament and in pre-Independence India. The waving of customs duties by the Mughal king Jahangir for trade in Bengal, influenced by personal friendship with the Monarch and his own personal comfort, is well documented in history. This would, undoubtedly, many years later, have been a driving force in Nehru's advocacy of a strong public sector in the economic development of poorer nations. It may well resonate today as the influence of big business in the legislative process is monitored, in our several democracies.

The seeds sown in the Parliament of India by Nehru have blossomed, in spite of tremendous odds. The thrust in legislative decisions taken over the years has contributed to India's ranking, today, as the tenth largest economy in the world. For its part, with education, health care, and rail transportation in place, the Gold Coast, subsequently Ghana, became one of the wealthiest and most socially advanced countries in Africa. Nehru in his inaugural speech is said to have spoken of his pledge of service to India and to her people and to the still larger cause of humanity. It is in our Parliaments that this dedication to service of the people seeks legitimacy.

No one can deny or question the responsibility that resides with Speakers and Presiding Officers as Parliament provides a setting in which countries learn to govern themselves in a continuous process. It is a place of learning, for veterans, as for neophytes. It is so for veterans, who, in a world of constant change, must be careful not to have a mindset that makes no room for innovation, while having a proper regard for tradition and established practice. It is so for neophytes, who, in the sometimes heady experience of their call to service, would seek to impose accustomed style on the proceedings of an arena different from that to which they have been accustomed. And in all of this, Speakers must know when not to speak.

It is clear that, whatever the stage of development of a country, institutions are important. The alternative is decision-making by whim and fancy which can hardly be acceptable. That is a prescription for disorder. In respect of Parliament, the idea of institutions ought not to be confined to the various committees and established divisions for carrying out its work. It should have to do with practice, as well. For example, Speakers and Presiding Officers should discourage members from making their contribution to debates by the reading of prepared texts. In that way, one of the finer skills of parliamentary practice would be preserved and not be sacrificed at the altar of accommodation. Behaviour to the contrary may well undermine respect for parliamentary practice in other areas.

Conferences such as this one facilitate the diplomatic encounters that can play a significant part in relationships among nations which have all become part of the global village. Our

Parliaments must be clearly understood, not merely as arenas in which the cut and thrust of politics is played out to audiences, supportive or otherwise. They must be regarded as hallowed places to whose occupants the development of our countries is entrusted. If we agree that that is so, the independence of our Parliaments ought also to be pursued with vigour.

In closing, may I take this opportunity to wish you outstanding success in your discussions, over the next two days, in this Twenty-first Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers, which I now take great pleasure in declaring open.

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for the courtesy of your attention. May God bless our Nations.