



News Release

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(CARICOM Secretariat, Turkeyen, Greater Georgetown, Guyana) Attached is the address delivered by The Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur, Prime Minister of Barbados, at the opening of the Fifth UK/Caribbean Forum, Hilton Hotel, Barbados, Wednesday April 26, 2006

**ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
THE RT. HON. OWEN ARTHUR
PRIME MINISTER OF BARBADOS
AT THE OPENING OF THE
FIFTH UK/CARIBBEAN FORUM
HILTON HOTEL, BARBADOS
APRIL 26, 2006**

Lord Triesman, Minister responsible for relations with the Caribbean in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Interim Head of the Delegation of the United Kingdom;
The Honourable Elvin Nimrod, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Grenada, Chairman of the Council for Foreign and Community Relations of CARICOM and Co-Chairman of this Forum;
Dr Edwin Carrington, Secretary-General of CARICOM;
Ministers and delegates of all participating states;
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

I am especially pleased to acknowledge the presence among us of four Ministers from the United Kingdom; namely Lord Treisman, Mr. Gareth Thomas M.P, Right Honourable Baroness Valerie Amos and Right Honourable Baroness Patricia Scotland; Chief Minister of the British Virgin Islands, and a number of Ministers of National Security as well as representatives from our sister states of Cuba and the Dominican Republic. We say a special welcome also to the parliamentary and private sector representatives from both the United Kingdom and the Caribbean and to our special guests from Canada, France, the Netherlands, the European Commission and the United States. I look forward to the arrival of Secretary of State Jack Straw tomorrow, and for his full participation in the major plenary and retreat sessions of the Forum.

The UK-Caribbean relationship is one of historic, socio-political, economic and cultural significance. It has evolved from a legacy of colonial dependency to the more mature and nuanced relationship of the modern era, as Caribbean states have attained sovereignty and progressively risen to the challenge of managing their own affairs. The evolution however, has not been without its difficulties, nor has it completed its course. Indeed for the majority of us, the repatriation of the final instances of our juridical and constitutional independence are still works in progress. Yet few can seriously deny the soundness of the path that has been charted.

This Friday, while you are still hard at work, Barbadians will be celebrating National Heroes Day. The chief architects of the self determination of Barbados, imposing figures such as Sir Grantley Adams, Sir Hugh Springer and Errol Walton Barrow, well understood the unique nature of the relationship between Britain and the Caribbean. They had first-hand experience of the metropolitan reality, and they developed much of their critical thinking in the intellectual ferment of British University life, in the company of colleague future leaders both from the Caribbean and from throughout the

Commonwealth. Similarly British leaders and bureaucrats of that era often had direct exposure to service in the colonies.

The modern day relationship between Britain— and indeed Europe - and the Caribbean does not in general benefit from so intense or personal a level of mutual exchange and understanding. It can be argued that this is to be expected in a post-colonial era, where old alliances are being reviewed and new ones formed, and where priorities are shifting. But the extent and pace of European retreat from the Caribbean is of great concern to us. There is now a clear perception that the Caribbean is of marginal interest to Britain, whose priority focus is Europe and Africa, and that within the European Union itself the Caribbean Agenda is even more peripheral. This is especially so in the expanded Union, where a large group of countries have little knowledge or interest in the Caribbean constituency, and where their own adjustment needs are understandably pre-eminent.

The Forum is an important means of countering these perceptions and of maintaining a focused high level political engagement between longstanding framers and partners.

“The Caribbean is at a crossroads. Bold leadership initiatives are required if the Region is to face the political, security and economic challenges. There are concerns – even within the Region – that the Caribbean may slip from Middle Income to Low Income country status if steps are not taken to reverse economic trends and to define strategies that will take fully into account emerging global realities and seize the opportunities ahead.”

These words could be but are not my own. They are taken from the European Commission’s recent policy document entitled: “An EU-Caribbean Partnership for Growth, Stability and Development.” I do not however dispute their validity, and I fully endorse the call for bold leadership. But this of necessity must mean on both sides of the Atlantic.

Regrettably, from the Caribbean perspective, bold leadership has not yet been brought to the table at the negotiations for the new Economic Partnership Agreement, or EPA, where the development dimension that was an integral part of Cotonou has yet to make an appearance. Cotonou was an historic agreement, because it moved us beyond the narrow focus on the commodity protocols under Lomé to a wider development agenda. However, without a clear definition of this component there is little prospect of a mutually agreed EPA. In the circumstances it is in order for the Caribbean to advance its own definition of the development components it views as an indispensable part of the final Economic Partnership Agreement package.

Let me quote again from the European Union Commission’s document:

“Preferential access to artificially high EU internal market prices is not a sustainable solution to problems of competitiveness, but the accelerating transition to a more diversified economy will be difficult. Diversification,

particularly in rural areas, is a difficult challenge, and requires a progressive approach. New activities can be developed around the dominant sectors, while simultaneously, if relevant, reinforcing their competitiveness and resilience.”

Once again, I have no major difficulty with this assertion. Caribbean countries must accept, and indeed have, for the most part, accepted the inevitability of the phasing out of preferences and the need to adjust our economies. But it is the callous manner in which the transition is being managed, as witnessed last November with the instant and unilateral evisceration of the Sugar Protocol, that has caused us such concern. In the case of Barbados, we have in fact already started to develop new activities as we diversify around our dominant sector, sugar, as suggested by the Commission, but our exchanges to date with EU officials have left us in no doubt that the prescription they would ideally like to impose upon us is the total abandonment of sugar cane agriculture. For reasons such as this, the Caribbean may be forgiven if it holds the view that there is unfortunately little sign of genuine dialogue towards the most viable and mutually acceptable transition arrangements.

At our two most recent meetings with Prime Minister Blair last November, CARICOM Heads expressed in the strongest of terms their anguish and frustration at these developments and at the deteriorating state of dialogue and partnership they seemed to imply. To his credit, Prime Minister Blair showed great sympathy for our position, and while it was clear that no reversal of the EU Agricultural Council's decision was possible, he gave a clear commitment to lobby for adequate transitional assistance to be provided for the period 2007-13.

Before you are tempted to suspect that I have confused my scripts, and that I am now in fact reading my intended intervention to next month's Vienna Summit, let me assure you that in the Caribbean's view, the points I have just illustrated are directly connected to the process upon which you are about to embark. Indeed, this periodic dialogue between Caribbean Foreign Ministers and our British counterpart is intended to sustain the special relationship we have traditionally shared. Its main purpose is to examine developments that affect that relationship, whether positively or negatively, and to agree on strategies and actions to reinforce its efficacy for the future.

In this context, you can readily appreciate that the UK-Caribbean relationship is directly informed by the larger UK-Europe and Europe-Caribbean, and indeed Europe-ACP, and now even EU-Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) relationship. It is vital for us therefore that our friends in Britain, who have the closest understanding of the Caribbean reality and who constitute our strongest supportive voice within the halls of European decision-making, continue to help to articulate the Caribbean's perspective in the larger arena. But if this advocacy is to be effective, it must be based on a full understanding of Caribbean priorities and concerns. At this critical moment in our national and regional development, facing an uncertain future devoid of preferential arrangements, the Caribbean's strategic dialogue with its longest standing partner, Great Britain, assumes an even greater relevance.

The Caribbean can benefit significantly from a strong Europe and from a strong Britain within Europe. A strong Europe with a continuing commitment to and involvement in the Caribbean's development will add balance and stability to our Region and our hemisphere. A strong Britain can be an advocate for that approach. The evolving process of engagement between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean is both healthy and useful. But the EU-LAC structure cannot and should not replace direct engagement between Europe and the Caribbean. In this regard the separate channel of dialogue and consultation between the United Kingdom and the Caribbean is a clear example of the value of this modality in focussing on the priority needs and concerns of the small vulnerable economies of the Region, and devising specific responses to jointly agreed development needs.

The Caribbean's partnership with the United Kingdom is our oldest sustained trade and development relationship. We accept that the relationship has evolved, and that it will continue to do so. We must also accept that changes will continue to be imposed upon that relationship by external circumstances. The challenge for us is to manage those changes without doing damage to the essence of the relationship and the mutual benefits it has generated over the years. I firmly believe, and I have said so before, that there is scope for the development of a mature and carefully nuanced modern relationship between Britain and the Caribbean. It is in the strategic interest of both sides that we should do so.

The Caribbean is an attractive and stable partner for Britain, in trade, in investment and in tourism, financial and other services. There are niche areas and private sector synergies to be exploited, and exciting new prospects for growth under the CSME. There is a supportive network of friends in Parliament and friends in Business, and a largely untapped resource, the Caribbean Diaspora, eager to participate in a meaningful way in Caribbean growth and development. There is the prospect of Cricket World Cup in 2007, and the potential it holds for substantial business investment, sustained commercial activity and the renewal of cultural ties. There is already a comprehensive cooperation programme in place between us on security issues related to Cricket World Cup and to wider strategic security matters. There is no reason why there cannot be similar cooperation and joint ventures between British and Caribbean private sector partners on the commercial opportunities the event provides.

These subjects are of course part of the substance of a new cooperation agenda between our two sides, and will, I am sure be fully discussed during your Business and Ministerial sessions. I am confident that the deliberations will produce meaningful results and a concrete action programme to guide our future relations and to prepare us for the challenges of 2008 and beyond.

I wish you a highly successful meeting and a highly enjoyable stay in Barbados and I trust that this conference will justify every expectation. I am obliged to you.
