



**GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER**

GREETINGS BY

THE HONOURABLE WINSTON DOOKERAN, MP

ACTING PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

AT THE

OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY OF THE

**21ST CONFERENCE OF COMMONWEALTH SPEAKERS AND PRESIDING
OFFICERS**

MONDAY 9TH JANUARY 2012

HYATT REGENCY HOTEL

9:00AM

WRIGHTSON ROAD

PORT-OF-SPAIN

- His Excellency Professor George Maxwell Richards,
- The Honourable Justice, Ivor Archie, Chief Justice,
- The Honourable Senator Timothy Hamel Smith, President of the Senate,
- The Honourable Wade Mark, Speaker of the House
- Honourable Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth,
- The Right Honourable Sir Alan Haselhurst, MP – Chairperson of the CPA,
- Cabinet colleagues,
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- Honourable Leader of the Opposition,
- Members of Parliament,
- Secretaries General and Clerks of Parliament,
- Distinguished guests and visitors,
- Members of the media,
- Ladies and gentlemen

Good Morning.

On behalf of the Government and People of Trinidad and Tobago, it gives me great pleasure to warmly welcome you, the distinguished participants of the 21st Commonwealth Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers, to our twin-island Republic.

I am especially privileged to greet you this morning as a Member of what may be regarded as the central Institution of democracy – the Parliament - and also in my capacity as Acting Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

I am pleased to note, that after 14 years, Trinidad and Tobago is once again given the honour of hosting this conference.

More importantly, we host this event in the year in which we celebrate our 50th Anniversary of Independence, proud in the knowledge that our democracy is strong and resilient, and that democratic values and traditions are deeply embedded in our citizenship and has stood the test of times.

As well, I extend a hearty Caribbean welcome to you on behalf of our Prime Minister, the Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar who is currently a Guest of the Government of the Republic of India.

The Prime Minister has been member of the House of Representatives for the past 17 years during which time she has shown great courage and has had many victories. She has asked that I convey to you, her fervent hope that in your deliberations and decisions over the next two days, you would explore creative ways to reignite the pristine reputation of the Institution of Parliament and deepen the link between Parliament and the people.

In 2006, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) of which many of the countries represented here today are members published a handbook titled *Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century: A Guide to Good Practice*.

That guide which was “an ambitious attempt to define the contribution of Parliament to democracy” was based on a scholarly assessment of the challenges facing Parliaments in today’s world. In a candid way it lamented that *“Parliament as an institution and politicians as groups were not being rated highly in public esteem in many countries.”*

The reasons for such sentiments varied across the IPU’s membership, from accusations of parliamentarians being a self-serving elite, to Members being more responsive to the dictates of partisan interests rather than the needs of their own electors.

Are Parliaments losing its connectivity to the very people it is mandated to serve?

This sentiment was echoed by the distinguished Speaker of the House of Commons, United Kingdom, the Honourable John Bercow, who I understand is unable to be present here today, and who in November 2009 called for reconnection between Parliament and the People.

In a presentation to the Hansard Society, Mr Bercow noted that in the UK there was a marked “decline of deference towards all institutions, but most notably to constitutional bodies”. He also suggested that Parliament in the UK was being viewed more as a parliament for politicians and not one for the public.

If indeed this a widely accepted view and from all indications it is, then we as parliamentarians and you as leaders in the Parliament are now faced with the critical challenge to change the reality and perception of how Parliament works for the people.

Parliament must not be seen purely as a theatre of politicians acting out scenes dictated by party politics or sectional interests. Rather Parliament must be regarded as energizing forum in which the people are present and their views are articulated.

As the pillar institution in our democracies Parliaments are indeed the embodiments of the will of the people. It has three unique roles:

- Parliaments have a unique responsibility to reconcile the conflicting interests and expectations of different groups and communities through the democratic means of dialogue and compromise

- As the key legislative organ, Parliaments are tasked with adapting society's laws to its rapidly changing needs and circumstances
- As the body entrusted with the oversight of Government, Parliaments are responsible for ensuring that governments are fully accountable to the people.

Are we as parliamentarians and our Parliaments living up to these expectations? Are our Parliaments truly representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective?

These are basic questions. Perhaps the time is now to rediscover the answers to these questions and to reconnect the Parliament to our people.

Our citizens are demanding greater participation in the democratic process. Let us so strengthen our parliamentary systems and raise the level of awareness and effectiveness of Parliamentary processes that our constituents will look at Parliament with honour and respect as the champion of democracy.

I am heartened to note that this thrust towards reconnecting with the people is already underway in many of the Parliaments represented at this Conference. Our citizens must understand the role and functions of Parliament in all its facets – legislation, select committees, parliamentary questions and debates and the relationship between Parliament and Government.

And we the members of the House must act in accordance with the rules and procedures of the House, underscoring the credibility of the said functions, about which we are educating our citizens.

Today we have at our disposal the technology and the know-how to bring the Parliament literally into the hands of the people, particularly our youth, who must be actively engaged if our democracies are to endure and thrive.

The internet, social media, traditional media, community interface, the school curriculum are all avenues to bring the Parliament to the people.

Let us learn from each other's experiences. Let us not fear using ideas from elsewhere, once appropriately adapted to our domestic circumstances, to solve common problems. There is

much work to be done to deepen the workings of our democracies, as we respond to the challenges of a young and impatient electorate in the present age.

With the wealth of knowledge and years of experience gathered in this chamber I am sure that this conference would open the door to new ideas, practices and connectivity in the Parliamentary process. We may be reminded by the contents of the book entitled ***All Politics is Local*** and authored by Thomas “Tip” O’Neill former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives and a highly respected American Political Leader for more than half a century.

All Politics is Local was a key message often expressed by our own Clytus Arnold Thomasos, the longest serving President of the Senate and Speaker of the House of Representatives in Trinidad and Tobago to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for building the foundation blocks in our parliamentary democracy. It is contributions like his that has nourished the endurance of our own democracy and I acknowledge his contribution here today.

Distinguished speakers and presiding officer, Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you and wish a pleasant stay in our blessed country, Trinidad and Tobago.

May your conference be a great success.