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FEATURE ADDRESS

Hon. Lionel Robinson
(Minister of Agriculture, Lands & Fisheries, Trinidad & Tobago, W.I.)

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Pro Vice Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen!

First of all, let me apologise to you, ladies and gentlemen, for the late start of this conference which has been due to a series of unfortunate circumstances. Indeed, perhaps this is a good way to begin, as all of you, I am certain, are aware that a farmer, if he is to be successful, must be prepared to cope with a series of unforseen circumstances; and if you are to advise widely, you must take into account the unpredictable.

I should like also to express my appreciation for your invitation to attend your formal opening ceremony as well as your subsequent sessions, and for the opportunity to make a few brief remarks on this auspicious occasion.

Your conference takes place against the background of eventful political and economic developments in the world scene, and, moreover, coincides with a most crucial period for Agriculture in the entire Caribbean. The theme of your Conference indicates at the very least, two things: firstly, your appreciation of the implications which external development can, and will have upon our own development, and secondly, your willingness and determination to make some meaningful contribution in charting the course of our destiny. Your theme is most appropriate and relevant, and I congratulate you on your choice.

It is well-known that the economies of the Commonwealth Caribbean countries are closely linked with those of the West European countries, particularly the United Kingdom, as a result of which we are particularly susceptible to changes taking place in those countries. The statistics of trade with these countries are particularly revealing. During the period 1967 to 1972 the United Kingdom took an average of 10 per cent of our exports, the figure moving from 12.6 per cent in 1967 to 8.13 per cent in 1972. The European Common Market countries also absorbed an average of 4 per cent. If we include the countries of the European Free Trade Area which are now included in the expanded European Common Market, this trading bloc would have accounted for roughly 22 per cent of our exports. The situation is even more significant in respect of imports. The United Kingdom provided an average of 13 per cent of our total imports, while the European Common Market countries provided an additional 4 per cent. The figures for the countries now included in the expanded European Common Market would be in the vicinity of 20 per cent.

The global figures, particularly those relating to exports, do not reveal the real significance of our trading relations. What needs to be emphasized is that a large part of our export earnings are in respect of agricultural commodities which are admitted to the United Kingdom under preferential conditions. These conditions, particularly in respect of sugar, we are assured, will continue.

The existing patterns of our trading relations with the Metropolitan countries are not really matters of our own choice. They are, in fact, a legacy of our colonial past, a relic from the days when

our own economies were mere appendages of the Metropolitan economy. The main reason for the existence of the colonies was obviously because of the role they were able to play in priming the economy of the imperial powers. They were, in fact, in the eyes of the imperial powers, an instrument of economic policy and a vehicle for economic prosperity. Their function was two-fold: to serve as sources of supply of raw materials and exotic commodities and to provide marketing outlets for manufactured foods. The effect of this relationship was that not only were our production systems organised to service an external economy, but even our very taste patterns were conditioned to the acceptance of and preference for, foreign produced goods. These, ladies and gentlemen, are the twin problems we inherited with political independence.

Our history would seem to suggest that we have always succeeded in making vital changes in our economic structure when faced by crises. In fact, one can even say with some justification, that it is only when we are faced by such crises that we are prepared to make changes which we had always recognized to be necessary. Unfortunately, however, there appears to be a recurring tendency for these structural changes to fall far short of what is actually desirable in the interest of long-term development, and for them to be transient, temporary phenomena. Very many of us would recall the significant changes we made in supplying our food requirements during the last world war, when we were cut off from our regular sources of supply: but we are equally aware of the rapidity with which these changes disappeared with the cessation of wartime hostilities. Our experiences here would seem to suggest that the most fundamental constraint to our economic development, particularly in agriculture, derives from our irrational taste patterns, preferences, and prejudices.

The momentous, though not unexpected, decisions of the United Kingdom to join the European Common Market must have tremendous significance for us in the Caribbean, particularly for our agriculture which has been so heavily dependent on access to, and protection in, the United Kingdom market. We need to re-think our position, to re-examine the direction along which we have been proceeding. As you have put it in the theme of your conference, we need to consider rationalizing our agriculture. The time has come when we ought, while recognizing the importance of exports, to consider making our agriculture less dependent on foreign markets and less susceptible to external pressures, and strive to achieve a greater capacity for self-sustained, self-generating growth. We ought to aspire more sincerely, to achieve the situation whereby we consume what we produce and produce what we consume.

Rationalization is not as easy as many people seem to think. There are a number of factors which operate to impede any ambitious attempts at rationalization. I shall draw your attention to some of these constraining factors. Firstly, there is the problem to which I have already alluded, of consumer tastes and preferences, oriented unfortunately, to imported goods. Secondly, the entire network of infrastructure facilities have been designed to support a particular pattern of production and it may not be easy to modify it to accommodate changes which may be considered necessary and indeed, vital. Thirdly, the human resources may not readily or easily be adapted to the needs of rationalization. Skills are not acquired overnight, and in any case, farmers tend to be somewhat conservative in nature, being reluctant to agree to radical changes in their modes of operation. Fourthly, rationalization may require mechanization in the interest of reducing costs. Bearing in mind that our economies are characterized by an abundance of labour and a relative shortage of capital, it is obvious that for social reasons, this type of rationalization may not be countenanced. Finally, the existing state of technology still imposes on us a dependence on foreign sources for some of our inputs, particularly heavy equipment, weedicides,

insecticides and other such related matters. If our objective is, as it ought to be, then rationalization may well require a modification of the technology employed.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and gentlemen, I do not presume to be able to pontificate on the question of rationalization in agriculture, and I have deliberately avoided saying anything that can remotely convey this impression. Like you, I believe rationalization to be essential in the light of recent developments, and in the interest of our economic independence. I have, therefore, confined myself to drawing your attention to some of the factors which we feel must be borne in mind in any discussion on agricultural rationalization; so that when you address your minds to the topic you have selected, you would not be unduly preoccupied with theoretical arguments, to the neglect of practical problems. Furthermore, may I remind you that at this stage, rationalization must be considered not on a territorial basis, but on a regional basis.

The task that you have set for yourselves is by no means an easy one, which I am sure you fully recognise. The topic you have elected to discuss and, we presume, to comment upon and make recommendations on, is most important to all the countries in the Caribbean. The people are looking to you for something substantial, for some guidelines as to how and where solutions may be found for the economic problems they face. They have a right to expect this of you, and I think you owe it to them to apply yourselves diligently to the task on hand.

I wish you success in your deliberations.

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