

Remarks by His Excellency Professor George Maxwell Richards TC, CMT, Ph.D, President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, on the Occasion of a State Banquet in Honour of His Excellency Raul Castro Ruz, President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cuba, on Wednesday 7th December, 2011 at "Knowsley", at 7.00 p.m.

Our Esteemed Guest of Honour, Your Excellency Raul Castro Ruz and Other Distinguished Members of Your Delegation

The Hon. Kamla Persad Bissessar, Prime Minister and Dr. Bissessar

The Hon. Mr. Justice Wendell Kangaloo, Ag. Chief Justice

Visiting CARICOM Heads of State and of Government

Senator the Hon. Timothy Hamel-Smith, President of the Senate and Mrs. Hamel-Smith

The Hon. Wade Mark, Speaker of the House of Representatives and Mrs. Mark

Other Members of the Government

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Dr. the Hon. Keith Rowley, Leader of the Opposition and Mrs. Rowley

Representatives of the Media

Other Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very pleased that you and Members of your delegation have been able to spend these few hours with us, at dinner, on the occasion of your visit to Trinidad and Tobago for the IV CARICOM-Cuba Summit. We are very happy to receive you for a special time of fellowship. Let me, at the outset, give you the absolute assurance that Trinidad and Tobago, on behalf of whose people I speak, warmly welcomes you to our beloved country, on this your first visit in your capacity as President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cuba.

Our countries share common waters and, to some extent, a common history. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand the strong links that have developed between us, over the years, the heritage of our peoples contributing significantly to a natural Caribbean symbiosis.

In 1962, as Trinidad and Tobago obtained its status as a sovereign, independent nation, the leadership of this country signalled that the Caribbean region without Cuba would be incomplete and made it abundantly clear that this country would not participate in its isolation. Consequently, formal diplomatic relations having been established in 1972, Trinidad and Tobago proposed the establishment of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) in order, specifically, to facilitate interaction with Cuba. I have no doubt that the seeds of this CARICOM-Cuba Summit were sown then and you are here in Port of Spain to further consolidate the relationships that are ongoing among our Caribbean family.

On a personal note, early in 1970, I was asked by the then Prime Minister of our country, Dr. the Honourable Eric Eustace Williams, to be part of an agricultural mission to Cuba. For me, a relatively new addition to the academic staff at UWI, St. Augustine, it was a singularly rewarding experience, as I was and still am, deeply interested in the use of natural resources, an area in which Cuba had done significant research. We learned a lot then and continue to learn much as we observe the strides that Cuba has made and continues to make in several areas, in spite of economic and commercial restrictions that pose challenges to broad-based development.

For example, it is no small thing that Cuba has achieved world recognition for research and development in medicine; the hepatitis B vaccine comes to mind immediately, as does the Cuban scorpion venom-based drug, Vidatox. Most importantly, it should not go unnoticed that in February, 2011, the United Nations Children's Fund recognized your efforts on behalf of children, the future of all of our countries and your implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been exemplary.

Our two countries enjoy the most cordial relations founded on mutual respect. We continue to trade and that is important, but the people factor is paramount as manifest partly through the movement of health care professionals and through scholarships. We hope to see more of this, through further development of academic and cultural exchanges, tourism, sport, direct air linkages and the myriad other ways in which nations grow their friendship.

On that occasion, in 1970, to which I referred earlier, I had the pleasure of receiving personally from H.E. Fidel Castro Ruz, a copy of his seminal work "History will absolve me", a statement that has resonated throughout the years from the theatre of the Sierra Maestra Mountains and the Moncada Baracks. During these past fifty or more years, the world has watched developments in Cuba and hopefully, we will all, some day, come to a proper understanding of the meaning of sovereignty.

Trinidad and Tobago, firmly committed to the Purposes and Principles of the Charter of the United Nations, will act in conformity with its obligations under the Charter and according to international law. In that, we must not be found wanting. At the same time, we must brook no incursions into our own sovereignty.

In closing, I recall the words penned by the late Marjorie Padmore, in the exhilaration, excitement and boundless hope of a new nation, in which she asks God to bless our nation and averred that everything around us declares that "We take a pride in our liberty". I call on us all

to remember that and in the context of the vision of human development, I ask you, Ladies and Gentlemen, to join me in a toast to the Government and People of the Republic of Cuba.