

**Remarks by
Sir K Dwight Venner, Governor, ECCB
at the Opening Ceremony
of the OECS/ECCU Exhibition Centre**

ECCB Headquarters, St Kitts, 16 February 2006

We meet this afternoon in what I consider to be historic circumstances in what for all of us will in many ways be a historic year.

One can say with some conviction and certainty that this will be a year for choice and decision making.

However, to paraphrase one writer, *CHOICE not circumstances, will determine our success.*

In the 25th year of the signing of the Treaty of Basseterre we have to ask ourselves some very fundamental questions.

For example, *what is there about our countries in the OECS which gives them the unique quality that makes them worth living in and dying for?*

Having recognised these qualities how could we maintain them, expand them, articulate them, and proclaim them proudly to the world?

Finally having thanked the Almighty for our good fortune and for being so generous to us, *why can't we come together as one OECS family, on the simple principle that addition and multiplication are far superior to subtraction and division, to make the most of what could be the most attractive and welcoming places to be on the face of this earth?*

From the BVI and Anguilla in the north to Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique in the South, there is no more stunning and aesthetically pleasing landscape and friendly, hospitable people that you can imagine.

All put together as one entity they would be simply unbeatable and irresistible.

Just imagine being able to go to the airport buying a ticket plane side, like in a mini bus and going to another island where you do not have to encounter customs or immigration because it is all internal travel, meeting with your friends and colleagues for business or pleasure and simply taking the plane back. This is the level of freedom we had in these islands many years ago when ironically the main means of transportation was by boat. Now that we have planes which are faster, our travel is significantly impeded.

There was a time prior to our independence when we were that much closer.

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With independence we put up the barriers in a splendid display of our newfound sovereignty, imposing divisions between ourselves and our friends and family just a stones throw across the water.

Sea water is a corrosive element, as we all know, and I have referred to the *Sea Water Syndrome* on many occasions in my public utterances.

The interpretation of this phenomena is as follows:

Despite the availability of the aeroplane, telephone, fax, and internet which allows us instant connectivity, we continue to be divided by little strips of water.

In contradistinction to this, there are many states in the international community and even in our own backyard which are archipelagic in character – for example, the *Bahamas, Antigua and Barbuda, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique and St Kitts and Nevis*.

Some major archipelagic states outside of our region are *Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and New Zealand*.

The question which must be asked would be *Is Geography Destiny? or Can Modern Communications Technology Conquer Distance and Overcome Economic, Social and Political Barriers?*

Within the Caribbean region as a whole, and in the OECS in particular, we must pursue the argument at more intimate levels to see if we can come to some logical conclusions on our particular circumstances and our prospects in a rapidly changing and challenging world environment.

I will put the situation in the following context and challenge you to think it through to its logical conclusion.

- Citizens of St Kitts and Nevis get married to citizens of St Vincent and the Grenadines.

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They live happily in what is the most intimate relationship that is possible between two human beings.

- Citizens of Antigua and Barbuda work side by side with citizens from Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique in a perfectly harmonious arrangement in a workplace where they have to be in close contact for the better part of each day.
- In any one of these four countries, people in one part of the country do not know neither do some of them care about people in other parts of the country.

The question then becomes, *if we can live together in such intimate relationships, what makes it impossible given the three cases cited above for us to live together as one nation?*

As far as one can discern, we are all committed to a united OECS and Caribbean region.

What prevents us from taking the logical and ultimate step?

Contrast this with Europe where countries speak different languages, have fought wars which have engulfed the entire world twice in the last century, and whose countries are economically and politically developed.

I offer two quotations which throw some light on our circumstances from two Caribbean Notables, one in academia, the other in politics.

Professor Gordon Lewis in his seminal work *“The Growth of the Modern West Indies”*, speaking out against the isolationism in our midst stated –

“They harp on our cosmopolitanism when we are 80% Afro Asian, they speak about our differences, our various identities when we are fairly homogeneous in terms of religion and language, they talk glibly of economic disparities when we are all poor, and our separation by sea when a sun jet BWIA can run through the entire West Indian archipelago between two successive meals.”

The Right Honourable Norman Washington Manley, Premier of Jamaica, in the 1940s made a passionate plea which has more validity now than it possibly had then in this rapidly globalizing world –

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“Here we are all on a sea of world conditions, stormy and hazardous in the extreme, each huddled on some little craft of our own.

Some hardly have oars and only a few have accomplished a rudimentary sail to take them along.

And here offered us is a boat, substantial, capable of being seaworthy and ready to be manned by our own captain and crew. If we won't leave our little craft and get into that larger vessel which is able to take us to the goal of our ambitions, then I say without hesitation that we are damned and purblind and history will condemn us”

The OECS countries in the 25th year of the signing of the Treaty of Basseterre are determined not to let history condemn us, but rather in the words of Fidel Castro *to let history absolve us.*

Our Heads of Government have decided to move to a higher level of integration, an Economic Union, and to use this as a point of departure for our future advancement.

Closer OECS union is a very necessary condition for the success of the CSME and wider regional arrangements.

We in the OECS must be very mindful of our historic role of reuniting the Caribbean by putting Humpty Dumpty back together again.

When the Caribbean fell apart after the break up of the federation, disintegration proceeded apace and only stopped with the signing of the Treaty of Basseterre.

Our integration arrangements are very deep and it is on this platform that the entire region must be reintegrated.

We, therefore, offer this very simple but profound exhibition to illuminate and illustrate the progress and unity forged over these last twenty-five years. It serves as a signal that our people are ready, willing and able in the words of Martin Luther King *to ascend to the mountain top.*

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There is indeed an inevitability about this process and we must all, politicians, administrators, private sector, civil society, young and old, men and women, put our shoulders to the wheel to ensure its success.

There is as the bard William Shakespeare proclaimed

*“A time in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.”*

THIS IS OUR TIME!