

Playing a pivotal role

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PATRICK MANNING graduated with a BSc in Geology from the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica, in 1969. He began his career working for the oil company Texaco before going into politics in 1971. He has held a number of senior positions in public life in Trinidad & Tobago including that of Minister of Energy, a position he held for five years. He became leader of the People's National Movement (PNM) in 1987 and is Trinidad & Tobago's longest-serving Member of Parliament. He is currently serving his third term as Prime Minister and was last elected in October 2002.

The Commonwealth is one of the most enduring multilateral organisations and has engendered very effective international cooperation, particularly among its member states. In addition to economic and social development, it has promoted democracy, freedom, justice, equality, human rights, the rule of law and good governance. It played pivotal roles, for example, in the decolonisation process and in dismantling the pernicious system of Apartheid in South Africa. Its consensual approach to decision-making creates a genuine platform for all its members, including the small and developing countries. With its fifty-three member states representing one quarter of humanity in full global diversity; with its wide network of institutions, associations and organisations; and with its commitment to multilateralism and global development, the Commonwealth is well positioned to play an even more effective role in international affairs in this new century.

It must therefore strengthen its global influence particularly on those matters of concern to all humanity. This is unavoidable in this increasingly interconnected world where none is insulated from the problems spawned by poverty and underdevelopment, environmental degradation, the illegal trade in drugs and arms, terrorism and the spread of disease, to name a few of the growing problems we all face. Indeed, the Singapore Declaration dedicated the Commonwealth to the principles of world peace, liberty, human rights, equality and free trade; and in Harare, the association committed itself to, inter alia, the pursuit of sustainable economic and social development.

The Commonwealth must therefore continue to do its part to ensure a free and fair global trading system, which is indispensable to global stability. Hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy and illnesses plague hundreds of millions in the developing world, including millions of unfortunate children. Aid can never be enough. It requires economic growth and employment generation to produce wealth for both individuals and the nation to fuel progress in education, skills development, healthcare and social stability. But how can this be achieved, when, for example market access is denied the basic agricultural products of the developing world to the thriving markets of developed countries whose industrial output, on the other hand, flood vulnerable

nations, wiping out indigenous industries, thereby deepening the underdevelopment and all its problems? Let the Commonwealth therefore do more than call for a resuscitation of the Doha Round. Let it join all other international bodies and regional groupings to develop the political momentum for restarting and concluding the process and let it make its significant technical expertise available as we ensure that development remains at the heart of the new trade negotiations.

Availability of financial resources is a critical issue facing many countries of the developing world. The Commonwealth is exemplary in its efforts to alleviate the burden of debilitating debt on its low-income member states. In this fiercely competitive world, developing countries need to vastly improve administrative, economic and social infrastructure to enhance their viability. The Commonwealth must join with others to improve accessibility to financing for development at our major international financial institutions for those countries of the world that need it most.

The growing effects of global warming are now real enough to make one doubt the survival of human civilisation on this planet. It seems that in addition to unprecedented regularity of the severest hurricanes, record floods, drought, heat waves and forest fires, we could be faced with food and water shortages in this new century. Thankfully, though late, there appears to be an emerging global consensus on the need for action. The Commonwealth must endeavour to influence the shape of negotiations for a new agreement on climate change starting with a UN meeting in December to replace the Kyoto Protocol. We must contribute our best efforts to save the planet whilst promoting the sustainable development of all countries in the global family. With ice caps melting and sea levels rising, time is not on our side.

There are other issues pertaining, for example, to security, the spread of disease, and trans-national criminal activity that cannot be countered without effective global cooperation. In all of these the Commonwealth must intensify its efforts for meaningful global action.

Let us therefore, in this new century, build on our solid foundations for the progress of member states and also for the betterment of the world family of nations. In this era of globalisation, the inextricable link between the two has further deepened. **F**