

An idea whose time has come

INTERVIEW WITH THE HON PATRICK MANNING

PRIME MINISTER, REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



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, by a sweeping majority, in October 2002.

What does it mean to Trinidad and Tobago to be the home of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) Secretariat? How does the country benefit from hosting the organisation and what responsibilities does it bring?

In order to properly answer that question, I would like to take you back, if I may, to the genesis of the ACS in the early 1990s.

The creation of the organisation actually came about following the application by at least one Spanish-speaking Caribbean country seeking membership of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and an indication from a number of others that they were likely to follow suit. As a result, the CARICOM Heads of Government set up a committee to determine the way forward in this respect.

It soon became apparent that some of the smaller countries in the grouping were concerned that they might be swallowed up and lose their identity if the agglomeration were to expand into countries with significantly larger populations. What they decided to do therefore, was to keep CARICOM as it was and to form a second concentric circle of countries around CARICOM that had a slightly greater distance from the centre, but were nonetheless part of an integration movement.

The ACS is a unique organisation, in that the foundation on which the Association was established transcends the political, social and economic factors that usually underpin the formation of regional groupings. We in the Greater Caribbean region are fortunate to have been provided with a natural platform, the coastline which we share, from which we can explore cooperation activities and build alliances within a framework of mutual friendship and trust.

We were honoured that Port of Spain was chosen as the headquarters of the new organisation, and it confirmed our position at that time as the diplomatic centre of the region. If you look at the situation now, you will see that more and more Latin American countries are setting up embassies here – and in one or two cases they have shifted their embassies here from elsewhere – so in a sense it has given us the necessary critical mass to consolidate our position as the diplomatic hub of the Caribbean. We are pleased to provide a 'home from home' for diplomats from across the Greater Caribbean region and welcome

the eclectic mix of cultures that enhance the already cosmopolitan character of Trinidad and Tobago.

The commitment made by Trinidad and Tobago to provide the Secretariat with a home is one that we take very seriously. To this end, we have collaborated at every opportunity with the Secretariat to support its work, to ensure that it is appropriately accommodated and to maintain good financial standing, so as to facilitate the Association's efforts to achieve its objectives.

At the same time, we are looking at the ACS now from the standpoint of an economic agglomeration, and one that gives us opportunities for functional cooperation between the various Member States. A number of countries here in the Caribbean have begun to view Latin America as the major market that it is and particularly here in Trinidad and Tobago, where the manufacturing sector is internationally competitive, we are seeking to move into the Latin American market as a way of expanding not only our domestic market arrangements but also expanding our production capability into these new markets with significantly larger populations. In addition, we have been looking at the trade agreements already in place between the various countries of the region and those that are now on the cards, to see what role there might be for the ACS in coordinating further regional integration in this regard. The organisation has not yet realised its potential as a trade agglomeration, but that is definitely the direction in which we see it heading.

How do the objectives and aspirations of Trinidad and Tobago chime with the goals of the ACS itself? What unique perspectives does the country bring to the organisation?

We are an English-speaking country but at the same time we have probably a greater involvement with Latin America than any other country in the Caribbean, so in that sense we are bridging the gap.

We have had a long association, for example, with Venezuela; it's right on our doorstep and we have been doing business with Venezuela in a number of areas – not exclusively petroleum – for a long time. Similarly, we have market access arrangements with Colombia, so we are heavily involved in Latin America, and being an integral part of the English-speaking Caribbean we are in an ideal position to straddle the two.

How significant is it for Trinidad and Tobago to host the ACS' flagship business event, the Business Forum of the Greater Caribbean for the first time this year? What do you hope it will achieve?

More and more, Trinidad and Tobago has been hosting international fora over the past few years, such as the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in 2005, for example. However, as the ACS is now coming into its own as a serious trade and economic agglomeration, the timing of the Business Forum in Port of Spain is hugely important in terms of advancing that cause, highlighting, as I am sure it will, the commercial potential and opportunities in the ACS to the business community here and elsewhere in the region.

What particular benefits do you hope that ACS or Latin American business people will derive from their visit to your country, and what do you feel they can learn from the country's experience as an industrial centre?

One of the things that we believe we can be most proud of has been our developments in energy. And the 'magic' of Trinidad and Tobago – as some people see it – has been the way that we have developed significantly our energy sector, especially gas development, on the basis of our low reserves-to-production ratio. Our ratio today is around 15 or 16:1, whereas in some Middle Eastern countries it's nearer 30 or 31, and many people would not have taken the risks to develop as fast as we have or go as far as we have gone. That really is the major achievement of Trinidad and Tobago in this regard.

Just imagine, a small country like ours, which is today the largest exporter of methanol and ammonia in the world, and two years ago we were responsible for 75 per cent of all the United States' imports of LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas). We are now moving into aluminium, which is also of strategic importance to the US because of its key role in the aircraft and aerospace industries, as well as taking an important step in petrochemicals and plastics development, giving us another raw material for increasing our industrial expansion and export capability.

A lot can be learned by looking at the development of Trinidad and Tobago from an economic standpoint. But at the same time our population is very cosmopolitan; people of many different races living together in harmony. That is another lesson we would like to teach the world.

Would you like to see business people from the ACS investing in the energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago? If so, in which areas specifically?

Apart from Venezuela, which might potentially be interested in investing in the refining industry here,

I don't see specific opportunities for ACS investment in the energy sector per se. I think a better fit would be the service sector, and this is an area in which a number of ACS countries have particular expertise. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is another significant area for investment.

Our interest, from an ACS perspective, is primarily in the non-energy sector. What we have here is a lot of raw materials, based on our oil and gas development, which we have used to build a strong platform for the manufacturing sector – and that is the opportunity that we would like to offer to investors from the other countries of the ACS. At the same time, our energy costs are relatively low, as you would expect, and that is also something of which they can take advantage.

The State Visit of Jamaica's new Prime Minister, Portia Simpson-Miller to Trinidad and Tobago earlier this year appears to have been extremely successful. Do you see a 'special relationship' between Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica as a force for progress in the region?

I have to say yes, I do. The Jamaican Prime Minister seems more committed to the process of regional integration than we have been able to discern out of Kingston for quite some time. That is important for us as we seek now to foster the integration movement by moving from a successful CARICOM single market on to a single economy by the year 2008. And once you achieve a single economy, then the way is very clear for political integration. In fact, it could happen even before that.

We are now getting an indication that, notwithstanding the historical antecedents, Jamaica is a little more interested in the integration movement today than has been hitherto discernable in the past. This is very significant. In addition to which, of course, we have agreed from a bilateral standpoint to collaborate in terms of the developmental objectives of our respective countries. So I would say that the relationship goes from strength to strength.

Lastly, as an active member of CARICOM and the ACS, I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the commitment of the government of Trinidad and Tobago to regional integration. In this regard, we have placed high priority on the establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME), as well as the strengthening of our relations within the Western Hemisphere. We recognise that the challenges that face us individually and collectively are increasingly global in nature and that any meaningful attempt at treating with these issues is best pursued through pooled resources and effort in the multilateral fora. **F**

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