

Scaling the Fifth Summit

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began his career at the Inter-American Development Bank after undertaking his doctoral studies at the John Hopkins University. He also attended the London School of Economics (LSE) where he completed his graduate degree in Economic Development of Latin American and the Caribbean. Before his appointment, in January 2007, as Head of the National Secretariat for the Americas, Ambassador Rodriguez was the Summits of the Americas Secretariat at the Organisation of American States (OAS).

The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is honoured to welcome world leaders for the second time this year. The occasion is the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which will take place in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on November 27-29, 2009.

The first meeting of Heads of State and Government, held in April 2009, was the Fifth Summit of the Americas. This Summit was deemed a resounding success by numerous international commentators and political figures. Latin American and Caribbean experts described it as an event that reinvigorated multilateralism and opened new doors to cooperation in the Western Hemisphere, launching a stronger calibre of partnership among the 34 countries of the Organisation of American States (OAS) and initiating the process of re-integrating Cuba into the fold of the Inter-American community. Indeed, in years to come the Fifth Summit of the Americas will be remembered as the event that heralded a positive turning point in diplomatic relations between the United States and Latin America and The Caribbean, ushering in a new era for the Hemisphere.

In the face of an extremely difficult global economic outlook and challenging environmental, food and energy crises, the Fifth Summit held for many the promise of building consensus on a new vision for the Americas. Through the prolonged efforts of Trinidad and Tobago at diplomatic engagement with the countries of the Hemisphere, the commitment to engage social actors in the process, and thanks to the goodwill and spirit of cooperation that reigned at the Summit, the leaders of the Americas were able to look beyond their differences, focus on shared interests and adopt a focused agenda that resonates with development partners in all their countries.

The Fifth Summit was also key to heightening the profile of the Caribbean nations in the Americas, promoting their leadership role in forging consensus while bringing to the fore issues of particular concern to the sub-region, such as shifting towards low-carbon economies to minimise the devastating effects of climate change and combating non-communicable diseases. Hosting the Fifth Summit in the Caribbean allowed the countries of the sub-region to present their concerns through the united voice of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Additionally, Caribbean leaders were able to strengthen bilateral relations with a number of

key players in the Hemisphere, raising issues such as trade, development cooperation and other forms of partnership. As the OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza noted following the Fifth Summit, “the Caribbean is duly assuming its rightful place at the inter-American table.” These advances point to the significant value of multilateral meetings at this level, which facilitate dialogue among nations on the basis of equality and shared interest. However, events of this nature are about much more than interaction among governments. One of the most important benefits of the Fifth Summit was the multitude of opportunities it presented for those who participated in the Summit’s Parallel Events – the Civil Society, Private Sector and Youth Fora. These events provided the environment for hundreds of social actors from across the Americas to network, exchange ideas, create and strengthen alliances and make a contribution to the new Hemispheric Agenda.

In preparing to host a fresh wave of events for social actors just prior to CHOGM 2009, Trinidad and Tobago brings to the table the invaluable experience gained through the Parallel Events of the Fifth Summit of the Americas. This does not only apply to the operational aspects of organising a Forum. A concerted effort has been made to integrate the perspectives of the Americas into the Commonwealth Business Forum, the People’s Forum and the Youth Forum. In this way Trinidad and Tobago has bridged the ideas between these two large multilateral groupings. By facilitating networking among such a wide cross section of social actors, Trinidad and Tobago aims to harness the diversity of the Commonwealth to inspire creative and innovative ways of addressing the challenges faced by people in all six continents today.

It is these challenges that are at the heart of meetings such as CHOGMs and the Summits of the Americas. Though the agendas speak to economics or development and debate may often centre around politics and even ideology, what lies at the true core of these events is people; their challenges, the conditions in which they live, and the opportunities and obstacles in their lives. Securing a future that is safe, prosperous and sustainable is ultimately the reason our leaders meet, rooted in the knowledge that in a globalised world, strengthening cooperation and building mutually beneficial partnerships are essential.

As the Heads of the Commonwealth come together for CHOGM 2009, the theme of which is ‘Partnering for a more Equitable and Sustainable Future’, they will

deliberate on many of the same issues that were at the centre of discussions during the Fifth Summit of the Americas: human prosperity, energy security, food security, tenuous economic conditions, and the global financial crisis. The issue of climate change however will undoubtedly take centre stage. Being held just weeks prior to the 15th Session of the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 15) in Copenhagen, CHOGM 2009 presents a singular opportunity for the Commonwealth to show strong environmental stewardship to the rest of the world and to articulate a unified and powerful commitment to addressing climate change. The real challenge for our leaders is to find common positions that result in mutual benefits in spite of their different perspectives and situations. The very existence of some countries and the livelihoods of millions of people around the world are at stake. If 51 Commonwealth leaders can agree on a way forward, then the global community would be one step closer to reaching an extraordinary but absolutely necessary agreement on Climate Change.

The Fifth Summit of the Americas showed that a small, developing country can take the lead in international affairs and, particularly, in building consensus on important trans-national issues. Indeed, Trinidad and

Tobago demonstrated to its regional partners that by focusing on continuous dialogue and consultation, the environment can be created where big and small, rich and poor can meet at the same table as equals and all voices can be heard.

We understand the need to create an open, friendly space for leaders to talk freely, as well as the importance of listening to all, building bridges and finding the pathways to consensus. Many of the issues facing Commonwealth nations transcend national boundaries and as such having a coordinated, sustained response through stronger multilateral cooperation is critical to any future progress. This situation also calls for a heightened role for development institutions in providing the necessary support for national and international initiatives.

This is the perspective that Trinidad and Tobago brings to CHOGM 2009, with the knowledge that given the right conditions, a meeting such as this holds great potential. Our leaders have the opportunity to make CHOGM 2009 a turning point in Commonwealth history. If they make extraordinary decisions, then the world can look forward with anticipation to much needed positive outcomes. As Prime Minister Patrick Manning stated Commonwealth leaders have “an inescapable responsibility to contribute to advancing the way forward.”

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Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister, Patrick Manning addresses the assembled OAS leaders during the opening ceremony of the Fifth Summit of the Americas at the Hyatt Regency Trinidad, Port of Spain, 17 April, 2009

