

A time for unity of purpose

INTERVIEW WITH HON PATRICK MANNING

PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



PATRICK MANNING graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree 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.

It is a landmark achievement for any Commonwealth country to host a Heads of Government Meeting. How significant is it for Trinidad and Tobago, and for you personally?

It's extremely significant, of course, because it will give our country a much bigger profile in the international community and cause people – particularly investors – to focus on us who may never have done so before. In addition to which, it will be an unparalleled networking opportunity because we will have the leaders of 51 countries were in Trinidad and Tobago, many of whom are relatively new in their positions – the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand, for example – so it will give us a chance to meet them and to renew many old acquaintances as well.

This will be your fifth CHOGM as Prime Minister. Which previous Meetings particularly stick in your mind, and which were the most successful, in your opinion?

The one that made the greatest impression on me was my first, of course, which was in Cyprus in 1993. I thought that the arrangements made by our hosts were excellent. But one of the things that I'll never forget was what happened on the morning of the opening of the Conference. We were staying in a hotel that was almost 52 miles from the Conference Centre and on the way to the Conference we saw women linking arms for most of the 52 miles. They were trying to highlight to the Heads, who were present from all around the world, the problems that they were experiencing as a consequence of the invasion of Northern Cyprus by Turkey, and the fact that many of their husbands and brothers and sons had been taken from the South to the North and they hadn't heard from them since. That made a big impression on me, certainly.

In terms of the Conference itself, I would say that Malta, in 2007, was a significant one because they introduced a whole new programme on technology and an initiative for its application throughout the Commonwealth. I thought it was significant that such a small country as Malta was taking such a progressive stance on this important issue.

What are the key ingredients for a successful CHOGM, in your view?

The key thing is participation. We learned a lesson or two from hosting the Fifth Summit of the Americas in

April and we have gone to great lengths to ensure as wide participation as possible from the Commonwealth, particularly from the business community. We also thought that it would be an excellent opportunity, since we are meeting in the Caribbean, in the Western Hemisphere, to marry Commonwealth businesses with businesses from the Western Hemisphere, in particular Latin America, many of whom were also here for the Summit of the Americas and the Private Sector Forum associated with it.

But whilst the Commonwealth Business Forum is a key focus for us, there will be many other important elements to this CHOGM, including the Youth Forum and the Civil Society Forum.

How valuable was the experience of organising the Summit of the Americas to your preparations for CHOGM?

It was priceless. We learned a lot of lessons, not least in the field of security. That is one in which we intend to make modifications this time around. It is important that we do not isolate the leaders completely from the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The security arrangements at the Fifth Summit were extremely tight and as a result, the leaders did not have the chance to be exposed to the citizens of our country, which is an important aspect of CHOGM, I would say.

What will be the main items on the agenda in November and what outcomes are you seeking from the Meeting?

Well, the theme of this year's CHOGM is 'Partnering for a More Equitable and Sustainable Future', which has all kinds of applications in terms of energy, economic development and so on, so clearly that will be a focal point of our discussions.

The critical issues will be those that are facing the entire international community, the first of which is the state of the world financial system and the need for a new international financial order. The second issue will be the condition of the majority of developing countries, particularly those small countries in the Western Hemisphere and in the Caribbean, many of whom are now burdened by extremely heavy levels of debt. Because many of these are middle income countries, they don't have access to financing from the World Bank and other international financial

institutions, so that's going to be an important subject for discussion.

We are also going to be talking about climate change. As you know, this will be the last Summit before Copenhagen and therefore to the extent that there are outstanding matters still to be resolved by the end of November, it presents us with an excellent opportunity to see whether 51 countries as diverse as the countries of the Commonwealth – including, as it does, developed countries who are amongst some of the largest emitters in the world, as well as small developing ones who are amongst the biggest victims of this phenomenon – can achieve a consensus on this issue. If this diversity of countries can come to some meeting of the minds at CHOGM it will be a most powerful step in ensuring an agreement in Copenhagen two weeks later.

The British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown has proposed the creation of a hundred billion dollar fund to combat climate change, but many of us smaller countries have no funding of our own to contribute, so the financial aspect of that is going to be a big issue. There is also a divergence between the developed and developing countries over the target – whether it should be a 2 degrees increase in temperature between now and 2020 or 1.5 degrees. I was at a meeting in New York where Mr Brown said that Vanuatu – a Commonwealth country – is going to disappear anyway, whether it's 2 degrees or 1.5, so for them it is not an issue for negotiation but one of survival. So there's a gap to be bridged and my feeling is that it is still going to be there at the time of CHOGM, so hopefully we will reach some positive conclusions.

We will also be discussing the application of Rwanda to become a member of the Commonwealth.

Do you think it is right that the Commonwealth should welcome countries like Mozambique and Rwanda that have no historical or linguistic link to the rest of the grouping?

I think it is. However, the Commonwealth will have to decide how far we wish to take that because there are a number of countries wishing to join and I am not convinced that all their applications are likely to be considered favourably. I think it would be wrong to expand simply for the sake of expansion, because then you end up as the United Nations, which is not the point of the exercise.

How relevant would you say the Commonwealth is to today's world?

It is extremely important, in my view, because I think that the kind of networking that takes place between Commonwealth countries is unique. And because of the diversity in the Commonwealth it is an excellent forum to discuss truly global issues, such as those I mentioned earlier.

How should the institution evolve to meet the needs of its members?

Through its technical assistance programme, I would say. That is where the Commonwealth is really strong – giving technical assistance and scholarship programmes. There are a lot of developing countries that could benefit from the developed ones and the Commonwealth is an excellent vehicle for facilitating that kind of contact between the two.

The Commonwealth used to have a much greater relevance as a trading bloc than it does today. With the Doha Development Round still in the doldrums, do you see a role for the organisation in advancing free trade in the 21st century?

Yes, because it is a link between the rest of the countries of the world and the EU, and that is an important part of the negotiations, so undoubtedly it has a role to play. But these are very rough times when it comes to global trade and whilst we have seen moves to re-start the Doha round recently, it remains to be seen whether they will have the desired effect.

It is an entirely different world now from that which existed in the 1960s and 70s, however, and as much as some of us would like to hold on to what existed then, regrettably that time has passed, and we have to adjust to an entirely new order. We can only hope that it is more equitable and hope it is an order that recognises the peculiar circumstances of certain categories of nation states, such as the Least Developed Countries in the Caribbean. Special and differential treatment – that is most important.



A climate change consensus at CHOGM would be a major step towards securing an agreement at Copenhagen two weeks later

Hon Patrick Manning, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, in discussion with Alastair Harris, Executive Publisher and Editor of FIRST

