

Calling a new tune

INTERVIEW WITH HIS EXCELLENCY MICHEL JOSEPH MARTELLY

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF HAITI

The task of rebuilding Haiti involves not just infrastructure, but also our values, our relations with the outside world, and our image internationally

One of your first acts on becoming President in 2011 was to propose the organisation of an Association of Caribbean States (ACS) Summit in Haiti. What makes the ACS so important, in your view, and what were your motivations for hosting the event?

We wanted to host the Summit for many reasons. Firstly, it is important for us to show a new image of Haiti to the world. We want to show the world that Haiti is alive and well; that it is not just a place where misery reigns. We have our problems, but it is also a beautiful country. This is also not an insecure place; it is safe to come here, and it is important for people to see this for themselves.

Secondly, the Haiti of the past was a country that was shy, silent, in retreat. The Haiti of the past would not have held this conference; it was a country that kept out of the spotlight. But we want to promote a new Haiti, a country that wants to participate in regional affairs, that wants to exchange ideas and to contribute to strengthening the region.

Haiti has a lot of potential. Many times in the past, we presented our problems as just that: problems, but we in this new administration are determined to turn those problems into opportunities. For example, the lack of electricity in the suburbs represents an opportunity for companies and entrepreneurs in the region to come here and to provide vital services and create jobs.

It is also important that the world sees Haiti as a market, as a place to do business. We are over ten million people. At the same time, we need to strengthen our relationships with our neighbours so that we can work together to resolve the common problems that affect us all, whether it be combating terrorism, fighting drugs and people trafficking, or creating a joint tourism policy and boosting trade.

The task we face, and one that conferences like this can help with, is to change the old parameters and to begin creating a Haiti that is competitive, that performs and that delivers. This conference is very important to us, and I personally called every single leader to make sure they would be here. They are all busy people, but I reminded them that this is about *us* – about *our* countries, *our* region. The ACS exists to help us all.

We can make the ACS into whatever we want. It is a larger organisation than CARICOM, and includes big countries such as Mexico, so in purely

numerical terms it has the necessary weight to achieve a lot of common goals.

You also hold the Presidency of CARICOM until June. Traditionally, other CARICOM countries have regarded Haiti principally as a market for their exports, but as the country becomes more assertive it is bound to want to redress the balance of trade in its favour. How do you see Haiti's role in the organisation changing?

We have to understand the mistakes of the past and make sure we don't repeat them. Haiti once enjoyed a position of leadership in the region. Ours was the first country in the region to achieve independence; we gave the word 'Liberty' its true meaning. We helped most of the nations of South America to become free nations. But over the years, due to bad governance, we lost that position of leadership and became a country that had to rely on the help of our sister nations. Today, we are putting things back in order.

The task of rebuilding Haiti involves not just infrastructure, but also our values, our relations with the outside world, and our image internationally, and this requires a change of mindset.

The Haiti of the past was a bystander; we wouldn't even participate in summits, much less host them. The Haiti of today wants to engage in discussions, to propose ideas and to be involved in decisions, so that we can benefit from this important political space.

Haiti has a role to play. We have something to contribute. We have experience that we can share. We want the region to see us as partners, and we want them to see the opportunities that exist here.

What concrete outcomes do you expect to see from the Summit?

It's important for us to focus on a few key objectives. We want to develop our tourism industry, for example, through joint agreements with our neighbours. Haiti is a very different cultural experience to the rest of the region, so we see ourselves signing deals with other countries to offer visitors a two- or three-country experience. Other countries have the resorts, the management experience and the funds to invest; we have a rich and diverse culture, an unspoilt coastline, and a priceless and unique history that we can show to visitors from all over the world.

Another issue that is very important to us is developing a regional agricultural industry, where we work together. For example, at the CARICOM Summit here in February we proposed the introduction of a traceability system for agricultural products, so that we know what happens to a mango from the moment it is picked to the moment it arrives on a supermarket shelf. Two countries were interested, so after the Summit we sent a delegation to Guyana and Surinam to pursue this initiative. This had never been done before. Now, you have other countries using a product from Haiti to improve performance, to regulate a sector, and to enter world markets.

This is what I mean by ‘the new Haiti’, this is the sort of role we can play; using our expertise in certain domains and sharing it with the rest of the region. We want to partner with our neighbours in areas where complementarities exist, for example where countries have arable land but do not have enough people to farm it. Why not make use of Haiti’s abundant human resources to cultivate that land? That way we could achieve regional self-sufficiency in food production.

We are also proposing the creation of a common merchant marine for the Caribbean. We have to improve our regional transport links, or we will never be able to compete internationally. At the moment, if I want to go to the Bahamas, for example, I have to go via Miami, so anything we want to export to our neighbours ends up costing more, and we become uncompetitive – in large part, due to the transport costs. We need to be connected in order to succeed.

How do you see Haiti’s transition from ‘aid to trade’ working in practice? How can the country benefit from the goodwill that exists towards it around the world?

I am not sure we have been benefitting, to tell you the truth. Haiti has a reputation for being dependent on aid, but this country has not really benefitted from the billions of dollars that have poured into it over the years. Three decades ago we produced enough sugar, rice, coffee and cocoa not only to supply our own needs, but also to export. Haiti has the potential to be a rich country, but it has been badly managed, for decades and decades.

When we overthrew Duvalier in 1985, we went from dictatorship to democracy overnight, without changing our mentality, and

without fully understanding the difference between the two. We did not create the necessary institutions for the government to function. There was no State to speak of. So, what happened was that the NGOs came in to help and ended up taking over the running of the country. The government couldn’t be trusted to spend the aid money, so it went straight to the NGOs. We had presidents and prime ministers, but they had no real power – it was government by NGOs.

In addition, the NGOs took all the smart people, and anybody else who could went to Canada and the United States to make a new life for themselves. There was a massive ‘brain drain’. Thirty years after the end of the dictatorship we realise that Haiti has moved backwards. People have high expectations of the government, which is a good thing, but they also have to remember that the government was not holding the purse strings. Now the NGOs are leaving, and Haiti is beginning to set up its own institutions, to rely on its own skills and to take responsibility for its own destiny.

Being responsible for our actions is a message we need to send all the way through society. It’s not just about the government behaving responsibly; we all have to. My job is to help show

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President of Haiti Michel Joseph Martelly in conversation with Alastair Harris, Executive Publisher and Editor of FIRST

the Haitian people that they can manage for themselves, and that perceptions about this country can be changed. I believe there is a sense of optimism now that we are beginning to move forward. For too long the world's image of Haiti was of a country in disarray, of people living in tents or fleeing to the United States in boats, and this is one of the things I was elected to change when I became President.

As a performer, I am not afraid to go on the podiums and stages of the world and sing Haiti's praises. When was the last time you saw a President of Haiti singing with Julio Iglesias? We know that things are still bad, but at least now we *believe*. We have seen the light at the end of the tunnel.

You talked earlier about turning problems into opportunities, and one of the upsides of the emigration that took place in previous decades is that you have a well-educated, successful diaspora in the US, Canada and elsewhere in the Caribbean. What is your strategy for harnessing the potential of that resource?

We wasted time during the first two years after the earthquake in getting the diaspora community involved in the reconstruction effort, as the ministry responsible was not properly organised. So I recently appointed a new minister, Berenice Fidèlia, a woman who has lived in the United States. She herself is from the diaspora, and has worked with the Haitian community in the United States through official US government entities; she has always been involved in the diaspora. Our message to Haitians living abroad is simple: You built Miami, New York and Santo Domingo, so why not come back here and rebuild Haiti?

We are telling Haitians abroad not to wait for Haiti

to be better, but to come here and make it better. Denis O'Brien, the founder of Digicel, did not wait for things to get better before investing in this country; he helped to make them better, and now he is reaping the rewards. So why should expat Haitians not do the same? There is money to be made here, and a new life to be lived, by rebuilding the country.

We say to them, don't just repeat what you are being told in the media about Haiti being insecure, because it's simply not true. Come and see for yourselves. When the US Attorney General, Eric Holder, came here at the time of the last CARICOM Summit, he named the three most insecure countries in the region – and Haiti wasn't on the list. And yet, when we are mentioned on the news in the US or Europe, it's always "don't go to Haiti, it's too dangerous." Why? Because our problems are their business. Selling the 'sick Haiti' is how they make their money.

You were an entertainer before you became a politician. How would you say your former career has shaped your leadership style?

Having been an artist is helping me greatly, I must say. Being a head of state, running a government, is very much like being a band leader, because the drummer may be playing something that has nothing to do with what the guitarist or the keyboard player are doing, but the end result has to be harmonious and to work as a cohesive whole.

How important is Haiti's music and culture to your rebranding of the country?

Ours is a rich and diverse culture, with many unique features that set us apart from our neighbours. Tourists and art aficionados fall in love with our painting, our craftsmanship and our Vodou (voodoo), but also with our music, and our gastronomy as well. So, coming from this sector myself, I am keen to use it as a platform for Haiti to promote itself in other areas.

I won't say we are unique, but we are certainly different, and people from all over the world appreciate that difference. We cannot just sit here and expect people to discover it for themselves, however, we have to take our culture to the world. As I said before, we have a proud history, and a great story to tell, and it is my job to slap Haiti in the world's face from time to time, if necessary, to remind them of that fact.

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