

Transcript – Prime Minister Rowley’s remarks at the Opening of the new Meteorological Facility (Crown Point, Tobago)

A very good morning to all of you. Permit me to acknowledge Chief Secretary, Orville London, a man who can never be said not to show gratitude and since we are in a mood to acknowledge sons and daughters of the soil, permit me to acknowledge the presence of the Vice President of the Senate, Senator De Freitas who is also from Tobago. My Cabinet colleague, the Minister of Tourism from Tobago, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, Minister Ayanna Webster-Roy, also from Tobago, Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority, former Captain of Caribbean Airlines, Tommy Lawrence, I think he’s from Tobago too and I would like to acknowledge another Tobagonian and one of my school mates from Tobago, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Senator Dennis Moses. So I think Tobago is very well represented this morning. Permit me to acknowledge a lot of other Tobagonians who are here; members of the Tobago House of Assembly, secretaries, councillors, presiding officer now aspirant for the position of Chief Secretary, Mr Kelvin Charles.

I would like to acknowledge the staff and personnel from NIPDEC, Civil Aviation Authority, Meteorological Services and the contractors, staff and others who contributed to this structure being executed and completed, invited guests, all particularly our students who are here, especially those students who are pursuing a career in MET services and meteorology of one kind or another and representing those persons who would be beneficiaries of the services to be provided by this institutional arrangement, the Chairman of Caribbean Airlines who is in the audience with us this morning, Mr Rodney Mohammed, members of the national community of Trinidad and Tobago gathered here, distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

We in Trinidad and Tobago if we are guilty of anything, we are guilty of taking things for granted. Maybe because we don’t fully appreciate how much progress we have made or because our aspirations, they are sometimes so high that we upset ourselves when those aspirations are not attained in any accelerated time frame. I consider myself a young man but I am not so young that I didn’t know when aircraft landed at Crown Point depending on the vagaries of the weather. I was from Mason Hall and one of our great outings was to be taken down to Crown Point to see planes land and on more than one occasion I been here and we waited for a long time for the plane to appear and then the plane would turn back and go back to Trinidad because the weather was not suitable for a landing. That was in my time and one of the enduring memories I would have and carried with me is being at Bishop’s High School and getting a notification that we should go home because a hurricane is coming and we were sent home out into the street and within 15 minutes we were in the eye of a hurricane, a deadly hurricane leaving Mount Marie and before we could get to Scarborough, we were in Hurricane Flora.

As a student I spent half of Hurricane Flora in the lime factory which collapsed around me and the other half in a house on the way home because we didn't know that a hurricane was coming and poor Mr Blackett didn't know that he shouldn't send us away from the safest place we were in which was the school. So he sent us into the street to get home not knowing where the hurricane was. That was in my time.

Today no such thing is likely to happen because the technology, the infrastructure and the facilities allow us to see storms as they are born and to have 24 hour observations of the weather around us and for hundreds of miles away.

It is against that background that this structure and its staff and its function should be observed. We've come a long way from those days, from those exposures to opening today a world class facility which puts Tobago and Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean in a place where we ought to be in the 21st century. Getting the technology that is available with all its necessary contributions to aviation, to marine, to civil defence and science in general because this facility has the potential to contribute to the scientific development and understanding of our nation and our region and also as someone mentioned, to contribute to our economic wellbeing by being able to leverage and to market ourselves in a safe, economic way.

Trinidad and Tobago, particularly Tobago, we are going through a fairly difficult period now but life is made up of ups and downs and there are times when you are on the up and everything seems to be going very well and there are times when things look down and then everything appears, if you are cynical, to be going badly. But this building represents the commitment of a vision to get something done regardless of the circumstances. It was conceptualised and agreed to in 2007 and the year after that agreement to build this facility on such a grand scale with such a wide vision of what it can do, the year after that decision was made was 2008 and that was the year when our country earned the most money in the history of this country. So that was a good time to have made that decision to build this building on such a scale. But we are a long way from the upswing in national revenues of 2008, in fact, 2016 must easily be one of the roughest years that we have had in a long time. We still maintain that a building like this and the purposes for which this building has been designed and been built are important to us going forward whether the economy looks up or down. You would have heard that we are not just committed to have built this building, we are committed to further development and the development that we are committed to for Tobago in this phase of our national development is a commitment that says that Tobago can and must contribute more to national development even as we are improving the condition of life and improving the infrastructure in Tobago, that improvement has national connotations as well and that is why at the level of the Cabinet at this time when our national revenues are not nearly as rosy as they were in 2007 looking forward to 2008 but looking forward to 2017 and 2018 that would remain difficult years. We are committed to making these kinds of investments in Tobago because returns are going to be beneficial to Tobago and the national economy.

The current Cabinet, like the one in 2007 has made and continues to make decisions for the infrastructural developments for Tobago and that is why in the very near future we would be awarding the necessary contracts to ensure that Tobago's water supply is adequate to meet, not just your needs but, the needs of a growing demand as Tobago's economic development proceeds. We've also taken decisions with respect to the execution of the expansion of the electricity supply in Tobago. More importantly, we have identified expansion, and by expansion I mean serious investment and expenditure in the tourism infrastructure in Tobago to put us in a situation where that investment could make us a real destination exposing and exploiting, I might say, our natural resources in Tobago in a way that we have not exposed them before. It is a chicken and egg situation; if you don't have a chicken you may never get an egg and if there is never an egg, then where do you get a chicken from.

There are other complaints about the absence of the airlift to Tobago and the effect of that situation on the room occupancy and the performance of our tourism sector and there are one or two disappointed and/or angry people in Tobago with respect to our underperformance in the tourism sector with respect to the rules we have in Tobago now. Over the years we have spent a lot of money attempting to market the rooms that we have in Tobago but by and large we have not seen a kind of return on that marketing approach. The technology has changed a lot that it would request that we change our own marketing approach but if we do not have the necessary numbers of rooms, and I mean quality rooms, available on demand, then what passes for modern marketing would leave us behind and that is why the government of Trinidad and Tobago today, in this period, we are placing a lot of effort in trying to accelerate your place where we can expand Tobago's hotel rooms by almost a thousand. The one project that you might have heard about is the Sandals' project and that project has the support of the government of Trinidad and Tobago and the objective, once we complete the negotiations satisfactorily is to build very quickly in Tobago an additional 750 rooms. Well nobody is going to spend that kind of money, including the government of Trinidad and Tobago and have those rooms available and stare at them. What we will do is to market them in the most modern of ways and the most effective of ways using proven marketing arrangements when we become part of a wider marketing system and therefore this ANR Robinson Airport in Crown Point would become a busy place and this investment in this MET service station would become an integral part of what goes on in Tobago in Crown Point in Trinidad and Tobago and in the southern Caribbean as a whole. So we have to make the decisions to step up our acts to get on a scale that can attract the amount of air traffic into the region, into our nation and into this part of this but to do that we have to have the rooms to market.

Today, people choose where they go, not by the government spending 100 or 200 million dollars a year and tell you they marketing Tobago and you ask them market it to whom and what has been the result of that expenditure to that they can't tell you.

Those who tell you keep spending it like that because a handful of people who are on the payroll are doing wonderfully well but you're not seeing the tourist coming commensurate with the money you're spending but young people are not so young people as source points are marketing and booking their rooms on their cell phones, they are viewing the insides of the room and in the bathroom on their cell phones and they are not even using an agent to make the marketing, they do it themselves using handheld technology, that is where we are in 2016. Therefore what we have to do in Tobago is to have the rooms available so that they could see it and have a place available so that they can want to come to and we're in the game. It is my hope and expectation that within 36 months Tobago would be seriously in that game of having quality rooms to market, having air services to bring passengers to Tobago having a terminal building to receive the tourism traffic and having people in Tobago who appreciate what we are doing and don't only appreciate what somebody else has when you go to someone else's country but appreciate what you have built in your own country and you are part of the tourism industry.

We own an airline, we spend a lot of money on that airline, it doesn't really serve the growth of our tourism. The Chairman of CAL is here this morning, I've told him before and I'm telling him again, "When your Board sits down, part of the factoring of the assignment of Caribbean Airlines, funded by the people of Trinidad and Tobago is to provide a proper international service. I'm not just talking about the shuttle from Trinidad, I'm talking about an international destination service that people from outside of Trinidad and Tobago from the source where tourists come and they can travel to Tobago because Tobago must be a Caribbean destination. There are a lot of Caribbean destinations that are widely known, we must be the last to be joining and that's a good thing because we have a fresh and new product. A lot of tourist like to go to new places and we are regarding Tobago as a new place and because it is a new place we've had some sit-downs at the level of the architects at Sandals who are showing us the kinds of things that they will do in Tobago and excitingly enough is that Tobago will not be just picking up an old hotel and renovating it along new standards, the intentions is to build Tobago the best of Sandals, the best of what exists around the world so this international brand would have as part of one of the stars in its crown, the Tobago destination. When we do that, the backward linkage all the way to the farmers, to those who transport people, to the entertainer, you heard a while ago a steel pan being played by one man playing a solo pan and I can tell you, that will thrill a lot of people who are still mystified that an oil drum or a G pan could be so mesmerizing.

There's room for art, there's room for culture. When I was a child my father used to come down to goat race and crab race in Buccoo and I thought these people were general idlers who were just looking for a day off. Going to race goat and watch crab run, today its part of our economy because you have something unique that excites people and this is the kind of thing you can market and sell. Difference sells, differences attract and all we have to do is to have a positive 'can do' attitude. Mr London mentioned a while ago the word 'attitude'. If there is any albatross round the necks of the people of Trinidad and Tobago that would make the hurdles ahead of us and the challenges in front of us insurmountable, it is this whole question of attitude.

We approach our assignments with the wrong attitude. It matters not how much money comes into the treasury, we are going to fail. On the other hand, if we approach it with the correct attitude with a spring in our step and looking back at how far we've come, the positive gains we've made when put our shoulders to the wheel, there is no challenge that this little nation will not be able to overcome. We have been blessed with some significant resources that we take for granted. We've been blessed with a good location in the world. We are in the Caribbean, one of the best places in the world as known to the rest of the world. We are between North and South America, good location. We have good connections to Europe, we have connections to Africa and India and at an earlier time, difficult and as expensive as it is, we've made significant investments in our humans and in our physical infrastructure and we do have a revenue stream that some people don't have. We have good weather notwithstanding that every now and then we have a hurricane but we are just slightly south of the main track of the hurricane belt and that too means something. Even as we argue among ourselves we have relatively good peace and stability among our people. Compare that to other places in the world.

All of what I have mentioned, these are attributes; they are not to be taken for granted or to be dismissed. We have to make them work for us and it is for the young people to be given good examples and for the young people to be put to work because hard work is really for young people. Older people are to make young people work but they must work towards a future that calls them to a better quality of life so they could see the benefit of that hard work and at the end of the day it all boils down to attitude. If we can't cut grass on the two golf courses we have in Tobago and someone comes here to play a game of golf and the courts is in such poor condition that they come and ask for a refund and they put that on the internet, that they've been to here and there and the courts were so bad, all the money you spend on the location would have gone down the drain because we can't cut grass. On the other hand, if we build these rooms and they're the finest rooms with all the attractions of the architect's mind and then the person who is providing the service believe that by serving a tourist is in fact demeaning him ourselves and you dot make them feel welcomed or pamper them a bit and they go out and talk about how silly and lazy you are or how sloppy the service is, all the money that the government would have spent and the entrepreneur would have spent would have gone down the drain because somebody had a bad attitude.

I went to a place in Ireland a few years ago and when we were due to leave, the transportation appeared to be late and we had to catch a flight in Dublin and we had to leave in 15 minutes otherwise we were going to miss the flight and as soon as that was known to us the next thing we knew, behind the counter, staff got out and started loading our baggage in their vehicle to make sure that we didn't miss the flight. I said to myself, this is service. You go to Hawaii and you walk into the lobby and ten persons come and ask 'Can I help you?' They're not demeaning themselves. There selling their destination, they're selling their location, they're selling what Hawaii has to offer. So when you leave there you know that that is the place you want to come back to and you avoid people going on the internet and bad talking you.

Tobago, I just mentioned planes landing here on grass, the old DC3's, I just mentioned not knowing a hurricane is coming. We are long gone past that. One bad minded person on the internet bad talking you here in Tobago and everything that we've done goes down the drain. But on the other hand, if we have more people like those old taxi drivers who used to drive people around and show them the island and have a history to tell them and treat them nicely; when they go away they will talk about how they met Mr Lyons and Mr Samuel. That was the old Tobago. Let us go back to the old time days and distinguish ourselves as a people on this island who are different, who understood who we are and who had a tremendous pride that can work so well for us now.

It would be a tragedy indeed if our young people grow up in an environment now where they are labelled by crime, violence, laziness, wotlessness and by blaming everybody else. We have a tremendous foundation here in Tobago and the potential is great and it is against that background that this government is making the investments on infrastructure confident that it will work for the benefit of an improvement in the quality of life and economic opportunities for Tobagonians and for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago and that is what this building represents.

So today I want to congratulate the architect, the builders and all those who manage the project again I too want to add that I don't want to be cynical and say that NIPDEC overpriced the building, NIPDEC wouldn't have done that. I'm sure it could have been the competitive cost that would have established the price and to have brought it in under that price is something to be acknowledged and I hope that that becomes the standard in Tobago going forward as other projects come on stream. So congratulations and thank you once again, Tobago is leading the way.