

Keynote Address

By

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Medgar Evers College, City University of New York (CUNY),

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Inaugural International Education Awards Presentation Ceremony

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Good evening everyone.

What a pleasure it is to be here.

What a privilege to address such an awesome assembly.

Please join me in recognising your distinguished president, Dr. Rudolph Crew, your indefatigable Provost, Dr. Augustine Okereke, and the inspirational Director of the Medgar Evers College Office of International Education, Ambassador Eugene Pursoo, Members of Faculty, students.

Other distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to express my sincerest appreciation to your President, Dr. Rudolph Crew for inviting me to deliver the keynote address at this historic **Medgar Evers College Inaugural International Education Awards Presentation Ceremony**. I am deeply humbled by the singular honour.

My heartiest congratulations are extended to you, the special award recipients: Your community spiritedness and spontaneous generosity in contributing to the goals and ideals of this pioneering Medgar Evers College International Education outreach initiative have come at a pivotal milestone in the life of the College and must be warmly and magnanimously applauded.

You have done your Community College proud. I can see the face of Medgar Wiley Evers smiling gently in unenviable joy and approbation.

Congratulations are also in order to you, the distinguished executive and administrative personnel and faculty members who have been labouring in the vineyard. Consecutive years of unrelenting, committed and conscientious service against monumental odds is, by any yardstick, a remarkable accomplishment.

What about a special round of applause for the diaspora of Trinidad and Tobago. Let's see how many of you are here. What about the Caribbean diaspora?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bring you greetings from the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago. We are represented here by a small contingent comprising (**Recognise them**).

Ladies and gentlemen.

Only today, we arrived from Washington DC where we had the pleasure of engaging in very cordial and meaningful discussions with Vice President Joe Biden. We touched on a wide range of issues: bilateral trade, hemispheric security, crime and lawlessness, climate change, the impact of the fall in oil and gas prices unfavourably affecting the economies of Trinidad and Tobago and numerous other societies worldwide and, not the least, the international response to the coldhearted atrocities being inflicted upon humanity by terrorist regimes.

These discussions will be on-going as we seek to establish common ground upon which to overcome these social, economic and political adversities.

Upon deep reflection of the current state of world affairs, I have chosen to address you this evening on the subject “Making the Difference”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is no doubt that, today, civilisation is being overwhelmed by unprecedented irregularities, daunting complexities and seemingly irreversible conflicts and controversies, the likes of which know no boundaries. Challenges of hitherto unimaginable and unquantifiable dimensions abound: some glaringly obvious, others lurking treacherously in the dark waiting to pounce upon societies, many of which lack the capacity or resources with which to confront the devastating assaults and their grave consequences.

The measure of our success in arresting these concerted multifaceted threats to international peace and stability will be influenced by two factors: firstly, the depth of our appetite for knowledge, truth, wisdom and understanding and, in the second instance, the intensity of the passion which we cultivate to comprehensively reject inept, misguided and corrupt governance and ideologies to replace them with leadership committed to the impregnable attributes of integrity, honesty, sincerity and morality in public affairs.

We want to be making the difference between shaping society the way we know best: creating human conditions in which peace, harmony, equality of opportunity and prosperity for all override all conflicting considerations as opposed to settling for dismal levels of leadership which stand in the way of growth, development and

progress, debasing the dignity of man and condemning multitudes to a state of perpetual poverty.

The choice is yours: making the difference in reconfiguring a new world moral and spiritual order where human rights and the welfare and wellbeing of all are given precedence over divisiveness and discord; where men, women and children can engage in enriching, enlightening and elevating pursuits free from the fear of those whose minds are enslaved by diabolically contrasting ideologies; those who seek to rain tribulation, tumult and terrorism upon the brotherhood of man. The choice of making that difference is yours.

It was Martin Luther King who cautioned us that
“Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men”.

Undeniable premonitions of the wicked world of terrorism... Need I say more?

Here is a dilemma that we currently face: How do we reverse the trend of witnessing so many of today's world leaders letting us down: being led in shame and disgrace in and out of the precincts of local and international halls of justice having failed to live up to the codes of conduct to which they swore compliance?

In capitulating to such malpractices, they deny us the celebrated heights of human righteousness: heights so eminently epitomised in the outstanding stature of our most illustrious leaders: Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Medgar Wiley Evers to name a few.

Medgar Wiley Evers stood shoulder to shoulder alongside those civil rights leaders who dedicated their lives to the cause of freedom, dignity and personal fulfilment. He was a defiant pillar of strength to the growing educational, economic, cultural and social foundations of the Central Brooklyn community and New York City, an extraordinary exemplar in whose name we gather to honour and applaud these iconic awardees for their contribution to the noble cause which we joyfully celebrate today.

It is no secret that black colleges and universities were established in the United States of America specifically to serve the educational needs of black Americans who for generations were denied admission to traditionally white institutions.

Former President George Bush is quoted as describing the unique mission of black colleges in these words:

"At a time when many schools barred their doors to black Americans, these colleges offered the best, and often the only opportunity for a higher education."

Today, we take justifiable pride in the fact that graduates from these black colleges and universities included women of the calibre of Patricia Harris, former Secretary of the U.S. Departments of Health, Education and Welfare; Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune Cookman College; Christa McAuliffe, first educator to have ventured into space and Leontyne Price, world renowned opera soprano.

We credit men of eminence like Thurgood Marshall, Supreme Court Justice; Louis Sullivan, Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the indomitable Martin Luther King, Jr., recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and W.E.B. DuBois, sociologist, educator, and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. Du Bois became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Ironically, Du Bois, frequently quoted by our own educator Dr Eric Eustace Williams, died on August 27, 1963, one day before Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his seminal discourse at the march on Washington, "I Have a Dream".

These celebrated heroes of the black liberation movement stand proudly immortalised by the philosophies they have left behind.

Here is what Du Bois had to say about education:

“Education is that whole system of human training within and without the school house walls, which molds and develops men”

Martin Luther King reminds us that

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character: that is the goal of true education”.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the West Indians and descendants of West Indian parentage who played significant roles in the Civil Rights movement.

The Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey and writer Claude McKay both played key roles in the Harlem Renaissance of black artists in the '20s and '30s. Other key figures also include Malcolm X, formerly Malcolm Little, renown actor Sidney Poitier and of course Harry Belafonte who it is reported personally financed much of Martin Luther King's activities and, by no means least, Trinidad and Tobago-born Stokely Carmichael who crafted the philosophy, "Black Power." Harry Belafonte's 1956 album was the first LP to sell a million copies.

We lay claim to men like former Secretary of State, Colin Powell whose parents were both born in Jamaica and former US Attorney General Eric Holder whose father and maternal grandparents were born in Barbados. Of course when it came to creating Caribbean music and introducing as well as infusing the island rhythms into the New York and American scene, there was always Charlie,.....

It is this long standing engagement of the Caribbean man with Black America in the on-going struggle for freedom, liberation and recognition that has perhaps instinctively given rise to one of the most positive developments in International Education Cooperation now being pioneered by the Medgar Evers College.

Only recently your President, your Provost and your Director of International Education signed a Statement of Shared Interest which commits to broad terms of collaboration with the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). This will result in very valuable student and faculty exchange programmes and sharing of advanced techniques and technologies in teaching methods drawn from the experiences of both institutions. I am told that similar agreements have been signed with Institutions of Higher Learning in Guyana, Grenada and Puerto Rico.

I am also very excited about the concept of establishing a consortium of the various campuses of the City University of New York and Caribbean Universities to oversee this initiative which will bring mutual benefits to our respective communities. The possibilities are fathomless and soon we expect that the regional University of the West Indies will join the ranks.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know that many of you are anxiously expecting me to turn some attention to Trinidad and Tobago. That having been acknowledged permit me to give a brief overview of the PNM stewardship.

Since assuming office a mere eight months ago, the Government which I have the honour and privilege to lead, has been making steady progress. We have been doing so objectively, systematically and without the excesses of expensive fanfare.

Step by step we have been putting the modalities in place to steer the nation's ship of state towards recovery and restoration following a traumatic and painful period of five years of reckless, irresponsible and woefully unacceptable governance.

The special entities which we have set up and the series of bold initiatives which we have taken in our quest for a much improved quality of life for all are taking root. We are tackling waste, inefficiency and corruption. We are restoring good order and good governance to a people who are crying out for these values. We are operating a smaller Cabinet, with no member standing in an overcrowded room, a Government down from 33 to 24 members.

Our newly appointed Boards comprising eminently and legitimately qualified citizens have been settling down and now oversee the successful functioning of our Public Utilities, Statutory Boards and State Corporations.

A thorough review and analysis to effect overall upgrade in the quality of our health care delivery services is well advanced. Our National Economic Advisory Board, is functioning and has begun to deliver as has been evidenced by the Mid-term Financial Review which was passed in Parliament on April 9th.

The drastic reduction in oil and gas prices has placed serious restrictions on our revenue earning and consequently our spending capacity. The restored Standing Committee on Energy now guides us scientifically and meticulously as we seek to navigate the turbulent international waters in monetising our natural indigenous energy resources, given the prevailing adverse global economic conditions. A modern Statistical Institute is taking shape in order to afford us the crucial ability to make data driven decisions.

In spite of our very challenging recessionary circumstances, we have revised the Value Added Tax regime downwards by 2.5%, which should see our citizens experiencing a bit more disposable income in their pockets as they face some inevitable increases consequent upon the economic adjustments which we are called upon to make, across the board.

Nationwide consultations on the promised Local Government Reform to give these bodies greater autonomy and jurisdiction over the provision of services to their respective burgesses have just been concluded. We move now towards drafting and amending the existing laws, as we work towards introducing these legislative proposals to the Parliament prior to the Local Government Elections which are due later this year.

To combat the recent epidemic of corruption we have laid in Parliament and are soon to commence debate on “whistle blower” legislation and adopt the procurement legislation with appropriate sensible amendments coming from an upgrade in Committee.

Technical work is about to commence on the construction of major highways: on the east coast of Trinidad from Valencia to Toco, with port facilities for a shortened sea link to Tobago where plans are afoot double the number of hotel rooms within the next three years. We are also hard at work untangling the scandal that is the stalled controversial Point Fortin Highway. We used to be accustomed to the Panama Canal and the Pan American Highway now we are faced with the “Panama papers” highway.

We have inaugurated the National Tripartite Advisory Council (NTAC) which is perhaps the most far reaching measure that we have undertaken to date, bringing Government, Business and Labour around one table to confront the nation’s options in a world that takes no prisoners.

The Council will have as its main focus the role of providing sound and informed multi-sectorial advice to the Government not only on matters which fall under their specific terms of reference but on such other matters which may warrant their invaluable attention.

These are just a few of our initiatives. We will continue along this path as the ship of state sails intelligently, caringly and responsibly forward.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Studies done by the United Nations point to the fact that more than 470 million jobs must be created by 2030, to provide answers to the effects of the financial crisis and to absorb the growth of the world’s labour force.

As such, new skills will need to be taught on a large scale to take advantage of the pace of technological developments, and especially to boost youth employment.

The reality is that we have to be ahead of the times. Our responsibility to empower our people for employment in the new world is not an option. It is mandatory.

More and more of our young people must stride out confidently and assuredly into the new dimension of work here in the United States and in the Caribbean.

Together we must provide for today and prepare for tomorrow, forecasting and planning in a systemic and objective manner, unwavering and unflinching in our determination to provide the best educational opportunities for all our people under even the most extenuating of circumstances.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Innumerable brilliant words of wisdom inundate our literary records impressing upon nations the infinite value of quality education in driving man's relentless search for self-fulfillment and realisation of the highest possible quality of life for all.

Here is what the late President of the United States, John F Kennedy is quoted as having said to the American people:

“Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation. Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education”.

Let me hasten to add that real progress will never be achieved out of a system that deludes students into believing that the most important determining factors of their success are certificates and grades. Indispensable to the cause as these may be, learning is a life long journey. It is about creating useful, productive and law abiding citizens, citizens who can be a credit not only to their immediate environment but to the world at large.

My dear Ladies and gentlemen,

The lagging world economic crisis continues to hurt the livelihoods of us all. But in the final analysis, we have to take charge of own future and continue on the journey to emerge triumphantly from our history of deprivation and want inflicted upon us by generations of masters of colonial oppression.

It was President Obama who in delivering the commencement address at Hampton University in the year 2010, reflected on the importance of education to Hampton’s first students (escaped slaves) and the year’s graduating class:

This is what he told the Class of 2010:

“The right education might allow those barriers (meaning the barriers to equality of opportunity and a decent standard of living for all) to be overcome; might allow our God-given potential to be fulfilled. Education means emancipation.

President Obama continued that

“In order to compete in the global economy, Americans must close the achievement gaps that leave many African American and Hispanic students and students in poorer communities behind”.

He concluded:

“So, yes, an education can fortify us to meet the tests of our economy, the tests of our citizenship, and the tests of our times. But what ultimately makes us quintessentially who we are, is something that can’t be taught — a stubborn insistence on pursuing our dreams”.

As I approach the end of this address to you this evening I would like to focus my final remarks to all our young citizens here in the Diaspora:

I say to you my dear young men and women: The New World Moral and Spiritual Order of which I speak is yours to build, to cherish and enjoy. It starts with pursuing excellence in all that you set yourself to achieve. The sky is the limit. I urge you to take advantage of the educational and empowerment opportunities which are being lovingly, unsparingly, and caringly laid out for your benefit. Do not hesitate to seize them wherever and whenever they are available. Let your parents, your siblings, your relatives, your friends, your community and all of, America, Black America and the Caribbean be proud of you. Look ahead passionately in pursuit of your vision and above all, with the grace and blessings of Almighty God, be prepared to make the difference and follow your dream. Come to Trinidad and Tobago for vacation, for homecomings or even to stay. We love you; are very proud of you and will always claim you as our own.

Once again, it was a pleasure sharing my thoughts with you. Thank you for having me; for your kind attention and May Almighty God bless you all and bless the wonderful Community of Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York.

Thank you!
