

**Ambassador Albert R. Ramdin**  
**Assistant Secretary General**  
**Organization of American States**

**“CARICOM in the Hemisphere: Reflections on its future role”**

A few weeks ago I read two separate headlines in the Caribbean press about CARICOM, which may have confused many. The headlines, which came within days of each other, were self-explanatory. One read “*CARICOM is in Danger.*” The other stated boldly, “*CARICOM is safe*”.

Both articles quoted men of great prominence and unquestionable experience in leadership in the region. Interestingly, their points began on the same premises. Their arguments paralleled on many fronts. It was their conclusions however, that resulted in sharp contrast in the headlines.

The state of the Caribbean Community has generated significant debate in the region in recent times. As CARICOM prepares to mark its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year, it is my hope that we not only look back on the path we have travelled, but move past the debate on CARICOM’s life or death and into the arena of promoting CARICOM’s values and achievements.

The time has come to adjust our position in the changing architecture of dialogue in the Western Hemisphere.

Ladies and Gentlemen, even before the so-called “discovery” of our islands by Columbus in 1492, our region held strategic value. While colonization, the slave trade, indenture and independence shaped our individual histories, identities and our economies, our bonds, remained.

Long before the Caribbean harnessed its collective strength, countries in this region showed that they were capable of making a mark on history. In 1948 Haiti was the first black independent nation in the world to sign the Charter of the OAS, becoming one of the 21 founders. It opened the door for the rest of the Caribbean to eventually do the same. Individually, Caribbean countries have proven that they can achieve much. Working together, I believe CARICOM can achieve even more.

Post-independence, the Caribbean which once lived in the shadow of Europe, moved forward to embrace its brothers in the Americas. Pushed by the fading out of preferential trading arrangements, reduced development assistance and many would argue declining political interest from traditional partners as well, the Caribbean was compelled to enter a new

chapter in its history. As the ties to colonialism were severed, the Caribbean began to find new footing within the Americas.

The challenges facing the Caribbean have, from time to time, forced the formation of new relationships and alliances. Trade between the Caribbean and Latin America became a necessity after Europe, and a stronger relationship between the Caribbean and the North became vital.

Today we see an increase in trade between the Caribbean and Latin American countries compared to about 25 years ago. CARICOM has established trading arrangements with Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, while individual Caribbean nations have expanded their economic ties even further. Through special economic frameworks, the sub-group has also developed economic ties with the United States and Canada.

It's clear that, at different points in history, the Caribbean was forced to adopt what my friend Richard Bernal described as "strategic global repositioning." History has proven that the Caribbean has the capacity to assess, adapt and re-think its strategy when circumstances demand. Forty years into CARICOM, are we prepared to undertake this exercise once again?

The Caribbean community was born in the knowledge that standing together, the region could represent a force and voice that would not be easy to ignore. CARICOM was founded on the belief that by working collectively, building on our commonalities, we could also find stronger footholds as individuals. The journey of the Caribbean Community has been long. It has stalled from time to time, but it has covered many miles. This year as CARICOM marks 40 years, the time is right to review and reflect upon the principles which founded CARICOM, not to determine if we are still relevant, rather to determine how to leverage our value in these volatile times.

Ladies and Gentlemen, CARICOM nations *are* very much part of the Western Hemisphere, and they play an important role in many multilateral and inter-governmental organizations, like the Organization of American States. Regardless of the size of CARICOM countries or the strength of Caribbean economies, CARICOM represents a significant part of the membership of many multilateral and inter-governmental institutions in the Americas. On the principle of one country one vote, CARICOM is effectively 45 percent of the Americas.

When CARICOM stands united, it becomes the single largest voting bloc in this hemisphere. Its value is tangible and it is not lost on many. Indeed, in some quarters, there is even the view that CARICOM's voting power should be reviewed given its small scale; a feeling that perhaps the time has come to re-think the premise of one-country-one-vote, to a ratio far less. In my humble view, this would not only be regrettable, but also a dangerous path to even consider.

As Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States, I have born witness to the many times CARICOM has made significant contributions in the principal hemispheric organization for political dialogue and collective action in consensus. Indeed, it was the voice of CARICOM which was raised in Costa Rica in 2001, which stopped the adoption of a mediocre Democratic Charter at the OAS. It was the Caribbean which demanded and ensured a more comprehensive Charter which now benefits ALL countries of the Americas.

CARICOM's value is significant, as has been proven in the many ways the sub-region has engaged and contributed to resolutions on sensitive issues, like Jamaica's participation in missions to discuss the Honduran situation following the ousting of a democratically elected President; or the leadership CARICOM provided in the debate on Haiti and the CARICOM-OAS Joint Election Observation Mission.

Let me pause here, to recognize specifically, the important work undertaken by the Special Envoy of CARICOM to Haiti, the Right Honorable Percival Patterson, who has been a strong, dedicated and valuable advocate for Haiti's needs in this hemisphere and on the international stage.

Ladies and Gentlemen, CARICOM's value is supported by the fact that the region has retained its place as the voice of reason and mediation when the differences between the north and south become apparent. History has bestowed on CARICOM the moral obligation to speak clearly and authoritatively on issues of democracy, rule of law, human rights and governance.

And if we return to the pages of history, we will find that it was also the Caribbean which served as the place of inspiration and reflection for Simon Bolivar, when here in Jamaica he wrote the famous "Letter of Jamaica", espousing the virtues of unity for the countries of the Americas, to face the challenges which lay ahead.

Simon Bolivar's vision is today embodied within the Organization of American States, the world's oldest regional political organization and the main vehicle for political dialogue and consensus building in the Western Hemisphere. With the unique convening power to bring together every democratically elected government within the Western Hemisphere, it is the OAS which ensures today, that regardless of differences, countries of the Americas sit together at the same table; that together, they work to find solutions for common challenges and find ways to make the best use of opportunities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, access to information and communication technology has affected the nature and scope of multilateral diplomacy around the world. Here in the Americas, political leaders have created new opportunities for dialogue and decision making. New consultative mechanisms, integration systems and cooperation frameworks have influenced the political direction of the Americas on many key issues. This new environment

requires, more than ever, strong institutions within the Inter-American System. It requires a new vision to adapt to the new circumstances of multilateralism in the Americas.

Sitting at the table of the OAS today are numerous groupings within the Americas. CARICOM sits side by side with other integration movements and alliances such as SICA, ALBA, UNASUR, CELAC and others. Some believe these institutions somehow compete with the principal hemispheric body. I consider these new entities as complimentary to the role and function of the OAS, and part of the new multilateralism that is developing in our region.

In this context, I believe that CARICOM will have to analyze the impact of dual membership which confronts some states. For example the geographic location of Belize, makes it a full-fledged member of both CARICOM and the Central American Integration System (SICA). Suriname and Guyana are members of both CARICOM and the Union of South American Nations. And there are other examples of overlapping memberships in other regional and global entities. How does this impact the strategic positioning of CARICOM as a bloc, on key issues affecting the Americas and the execution of a common foreign policy? Which priority takes precedent, and can it be used as an advantage?

Indeed, we have reached an interesting place in regional, hemispheric and global affairs. Our countries have felt the fallout of the global economic crisis and been threatened by the thought of food insecurity. We have borne witness to the impact of unemployment and the rising cost of living. We have also felt the pain of crime and the threats to our security. Our vulnerability to natural disasters remains, even as we grapple with the debate over climate change policies.

All the while, we have strived to improve the quality and standard of life for our peoples, by continuing to pursue our path to development. While there is still much to be done, these achievements have already sparked the interest of potential partners. In the last years we have seen keen investment and political interest in the Caribbean from other parts of the world, including South America, Asia and Africa. How are we, as CARICOM working together to maximize these opportunities while ensuring that these interests are mutually beneficial?

The Caribbean order of priorities is not shared by all, and in the face of competition for limited resources within some of our multilateral institutions, there are bold arguments to remove the focus on development initiatives which directly benefit CARICOM countries. CARICOM, therefore, is at a crucial juncture and our leaders must determine how the bloc will strategically position itself in the future.

The time has come for another round of strategic global repositioning. More than ever before in history, CARICOM requires a strategic foreign policy which factors in the current

economic and political dynamics of the hemisphere. These policies and positions must be streamlined if we are to make the most of the opportunities before us, and confront the challenges which also lie ahead.

Trinidad and Tobago's Foreign Minister Winston Dookeran recently spoke of the need for a "Caribbean convergence strategy", which combines in a common foreign policy, political goals and economic objectives which result in political influence, opportunity and a potentially enlarged economic space.

Indeed, the time has come for us to do the unusual, if we are to weather the unexpected.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe in CARICOM's strength. I have seen the power of its vote and its voice. Now, more than ever, it is of critical importance for CARICOM leaders to revisit collective objectives. The nature and scope of the integration process has changed and new dimensions have been added. It is against this background that I encourage CARICOM's policy makers to renew the political commitment to regional integration.

A great man of the Caribbean once ventured to say that the "Caribbean needs a values and attitudes adjustment." I would hope that this adjustment would extend to our future foreign policy. In this evolving hemispheric multilateral architecture, the principal question is how the Caribbean Community will position itself in the Americas? What options are there for CARICOM?

Without any doubt, CARICOM will have to not only recognize its own strength, but make it a central tactical tool in the execution of foreign policy objectives.

Furthermore, CARICOM will have to develop a strategic vision on its role in the Western Hemisphere and determine its expectations of this engagement. In other words, what is CARICOM's own agenda for the hemisphere? The reality is that, given global developments and a further deterioration of special cooperation agreements, CARICOM's political presence in the Americas will become more prominent.

Therefore, this strategic vision for successful multilateral diplomacy, along with a realistic plan for engagement in the hemisphere, must be a thoughtful and proactive common foreign policy that is intelligence based, serving both the political and economic agendas. Central to this strategic exercise should be the matter of how CARICOM intends to utilize its critical and valuable assets to its own benefit, in the engagement of the new multilateralism that is developing in the Americas.

History has given CARICOM countries the moral authority to speak to issues of peace, the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights, press freedom, an inclusive approach to civil society, equality and social justice. We have a lot to offer and as PJ Patterson recently pointed out, CARICOM itself has achieved significant milestones including functional cooperation, the dismantling of trade barriers and the establishment of the Single Market.

At the same time, CARICOM must be prepared to participate, engage and provide leadership on issues which not only affect us, but our neighbors as well. Such interventions reinforce our relevance and value.

In this necessary reflection, CARICOM countries will have to determine the fundamental principles upon which its hemispheric foreign policy should be founded, as it has the potential to make CARICOM a reliable and therefore trusted partner in the hemispheric debate. This kind of measured diplomacy is often the best guarantee for building trust and confidence, and strengthening sincere partnerships.

CARICOM's collective foreign policy must also be consistent, demonstrating that on matters of principle, in spite of our individual differences, CARICOM can jointly protect the interests of our region.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am convinced that the more involved the Caribbean becomes in the hemisphere and issues outside our own village, the more relevant we become. We must broaden CARICOM's vision in this new environment. Business people often say success comes down to "location, location, location." Geo-politically the Caribbean is fortunate enough to be in an ideal location, one which makes us a natural bridge in the context of the Americas. Let us also use our location, to our mutual advantage.

Against this background, CARICOM's increased engagement within the Americas must also focus on forging stronger relations with key partners in South America and the Central American region as a whole.

Two years ago in 2011, in the face of challenging economic times in the region, my office at the OAS was called upon to do something unusual. On several separate occasions, we were approached by business people and government officials from the Caribbean and Central America, who shared with us the desire to explore new opportunities for trade and investment, in the context of volatile markets and economic uncertainty.

Against this background, we brought together the top businessmen from Central America and the Caribbean, to meet with government officials on the sidelines of the SICA CARICOM Summit in El Salvador. Behind closed doors, free and frank discussions took place.

The message was clear: in the face of new challenges, the movers and shakers of both regions had recognized that the time had come to work together.

A year later, the momentum continued, with the top executives of business from both regions joining government officials, this time in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Panama's President Martinelli addressed the group in a private lunch meeting, he too acknowledging that the time had come to do something different in the face of global constraints.

This year, working with the Government of Guatemala, we are moving to host the third such meeting, this time on sidelines of the OAS General Assembly. Concrete results have come out of these meetings, tangibly improving access to opportunity for people of both regions.

My office at the OAS started this initiative, because organizations like ours are being increasingly asked by member states to put action to our promises to improve the quality of life for citizens of the Americas. In delivering on this promise, we have recognized that the time has come to step out of comfort zones and traditional roles. It is in this same vein, that I believe the time has come for CARICOM to look at non-traditional avenues to explore its value and leverage its strength.

CARICOM will have to be bold enough to speak out with force and conviction on issues that will shape its future. The Caribbean tradition and experience in democracy, evidenced by the range of state institutions supporting the democratic framework, is a model that is held in high regard elsewhere in this hemisphere. The fundamentals of our system which we often take for granted, are still goals for some of our brothers. CARICOM is in a position to hold up its successes as useful examples to the rest of the Americas.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me state in no uncertain terms that I disagree with those who believe that CARICOM must be indefinitely confined to timidly watch the world go by from the side lines. Such a philosophy betrays a fundamental crisis of confidence in our region and insults the achievements of those who have stood against the odds to engage the world on Caribbean terms.

If we as Caribbean people lose confidence in who we are and what we can achieve, we are bowing to the tactics of intimidation which our forefathers opposed.

There is a new world emerging around CARICOM, and CARICOM must be ready to engage, influence and benefit from that new environment.

As I close, allow me reiterate the words of Simon Bolivar in the "Carta de Jamaica": "When success is not assured, when the state is weak, and when results are distantly seen, all men hesitate."

Ladies and Gentlemen, at this critical juncture and on the eve of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Caribbean Community, let us as a proud Caribbean people, not hesitate.

I thank you.

***[Lecture given by Ambassador Albert Ramdin, Assistant Secretary General, Organization of American States at the Department of Government, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona – Jamaica, 19 March 2013]***