

SELECTED DISCOURSES BY THE
PRIME MINISTER OF GUYANA

FORBES BURNHAM



A DESTINY TO MOULD

Extracts from speech to National Assembly in
debate on foreign policy, 21 March 1967

Guyana, though situated on the South American continent, is – historically, traditionally, culturally and economically – a Caribbean nation. Its people speak the same language, are of the same ethnic origins, play the same sports and have inherited similar political and legal structures as the people of the Commonwealth Caribbean islands, all formerly British colonies.

Forbes Burnham, from the beginning of his political career, championed the cause of Caribbean unity and eschewed the idea of a 'Continental Destiny' for his country.

When, in the late 1950s, the Caribbean islands formed a political federation and the British Guiana government under Dr Cheddi Jagan stayed aloof, Burnham tabled a motion in the Legislative Council urging that British Guiana join the federation. The motion was lost and in 1962, the West Indies federation collapsed with the withdrawal of Jamaica.

Mr Burnham remained in the forefront of the movement to revive Caribbean unity and, after winning the 1964 election, he entered into discussions with Prime Minister of Barbados, Mr Errol Barrow, towards this end. One year later, in December 1965, these discussions led to the formation of the Caribbean Free Trade Association between Barbados, Antigua and British Guiana.

The C.A.R.I.F.T.A. Agreement left the door wide open for Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and the smaller Commonwealth Caribbean islands to join. Mr Burnham's efforts, combined with those of his colleagues in the Caribbean, have borne fruit. The Commonwealth Caribbean countries – both the independent nations and the associated States – are now all members of C.A.R.I.F.T.A. and C.A.R.I.F.T.A.

embraces today all the Independent Commonwealth Caribbean nations and all the associated States. But to Forbes Burnham this is only a beginning, and he restlessly champions the cause and advances the programme of Caribbean integration, through all the ways open to him.

In March of 1965, it will be recalled that the regular Caribbean heads of government meeting for that year took place in Guyana and that marked a re-entry for Guyana onto the Caribbean scene and the re-integration of Guyana to the Caribbean family. That has been followed by what can be accurately described as a vast improvement in the relationship between Guyana and the rest of the Caribbean.

Undoubtedly, from time to time, there have been slight differences and pin-pricks from one side or another, but those things are part of the facts of international life and should not unduly concern or disturb us. There is no doubt that our re-entry onto the Caribbean scene was welcomed sincerely and seriously by our Caribbean colleagues and we went further in December 1965, when there was signed the Caribbean Free Trade Agreement at Dickenson Bay between Antigua, Barbados and Guyana.

We do not say that the signing of the agreement was on the sole initiative of Guyana; but what we do say is that the Guyana government took a very active and important part in achieving C.A.R.I.F.T.A.

The government of Guyana appreciates very fully that though C.A.R.I.F.T.A., as it now is, does mean or represent a step forward, does have the possibility, nay, the probability, for an increase of trade as between the three signatory territories and the rationalising of their respective and joint economies, to stop at an association limited to three Caribbean territories is to do injustice to the concept of Caribbean regionalism and the Caribbean personality.

This is why Guyana welcomes the positive interest shown by Trinidad and all of the other Commonwealth countries in C.A.R.I.F.T.A.; that is why Guyana, along with the two other signatory governments of Antigua and Barbados, will shortly be jointly sponsoring two conferences to discuss positively and meaningfully the expansion of C.A.R.I.F.T.A. In those circumstances, the Guyana government welcomes the recent statement by the Trinidad Minister of Trade that Trinidad's accession to the O.A.S. is not considered by

his government to be in conflict with Trinidad's interest in acceding to a free trade agreement encompassing the Caribbean Commonwealth countries.

I have recently come from the Caribbean and I have had the opportunity of assessing at first-hand the response not only of Caribbean governments but of Caribbean people (a) to Guyana's participation with the rest of the Caribbean in exercises like this and (b) to the concept of a Caribbean nation. In these days when already independent, large and, in some cases, powerful nations are seeking to come together, it seems elementary that such an exercise is desirable in the Caribbean.

It is true that the federation came to grief but it is also true that the West Indian peoples in fields other than cricket or in addition to the field of cricket, are most anxious that there be a coming together. We do not underestimate the difficulties. We do not for one moment attempt to ignore the individual problems which may arise, but of this we are sure, that the fact of a Caribbean nation will be in our time. And, secondly, that Guyana is in a peculiar position to make a tremendous and significant contribution to the achievement of that fact.

This government does so, sir, not out of a desire to rule anyone or run anyone's affairs. In fact, the Guyanese delegations at these Caribbean meetings are noted for their understanding, for their attitude of equality and for their unwillingness to talk down to anyone. It seems to us that if we are to have a West Indian nation we will have to get rid of the 'big island' and 'big territory' complex and attitude and to realise that survival for *all* is dependent upon the efforts of *all*.

We have dedicated ourselves to making an important contribution to the building of a Caribbean nation, starting from the level of trade, followed by economic cooperation and later, time and experience will show what form even closer cooperation will take for the survival of the Caribbean peoples.

'We Must Integrate or Perish.' Speech to Conference of Officials of the Commonwealth Caribbean Territories, Georgetown, Guyana, August 1967

A gathering of such academic distinction and administrative experience needs no polemics from me on the vital importance, nay, the inevitability of regional groupings, but perhaps I may be pardoned for adverting to the global picture of successful regional schemes and associations aimed at, and achieving integration of their members and participants. We find them in Europe, Asia, Africa and next-door in Central and Latin America. Perhaps I will be forgiven for reminding even this gathering that the Caribbean can no longer, like the proverbial ostrich, hide its head in our beautiful sandy beaches and ignore the trends and impelling forces of change in the world economic order. Either we weld ourselves into a regional grouping serving primarily Caribbean needs, or lacking a common positive policy, have our various territories and nations drawn hither and thither into, and by, other large groupings where the peculiar problems of the Caribbean are lost and where we become the objects of neo-colonialist exploitation, and achieve the pitiable status of international mendicants.

The history of efforts at Caribbean collaboration fills the pages of many distinguished, and not too distinguished works, and need hardly detain us here. Suffice is to say that discussion, argument, rhetoric and semantics without follow-up action, have served only to disguise the failure to act. We may delude ourselves, but the judgment of posterity and history will be cold, harsh and accurate. It is my hope, therefore, that this conference while giving its attention to the ultimate, will focus discussions on those areas and subjects from which we can have tangible results in the form of immediate practical action. Hunger and

poverty are not relieved by philosophical pratings, or academic outpourings.

No one can deny the need for action. It is that need which is itself the *rationale* and *raison d'être* of this conference. Today, we are where we were yesterday; precisely through our inability to concert and our incapacity to yield the form for the substance; precisely because we have failed to match words with action.

Our problems differ only in degree, not in kind. All of our economies exhibit an unhealthy ratio of foreign trade to national economic activity. Less than 3 per cent of our total trade represents intra-Caribbean trade. The other 97 per cent of that total trade is dangerously concentrated on commodities and products controlled from outside the region, like sugar, bauxite, bananas, to take three of the biggest earners.

We all have the persistent menace of unemployment ranging from 10 per cent to 20 per cent. Emigration outlets outside of the Caribbean in spite of high moral posturings, are closed to us. Ours is one of the highest birth rates in the world. The pressure is building up and unless we plan and act, the lid will soon be blown off Caribbean society with dangerous and world-shaking results.

Ours is a common problem of capital deficiency, of shortages in the professional and technological fields and of the ineligibility of nationally important social projects for international finance. In some cases, over the past decade, in spite of a few flashes of hope and achievement, our economy in this region has been stagnating and in some quarters there have even been signs of slippage. Let us to our own selves be true. These are the facts. This is the naked truth. Either *we integrate, or we perish*, unwept, unhonoured.

A perfect solution to, or institution for, integration cannot be hoped for. As a former Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands said in reference to the European Common Market: 'International institutions may be more or less well conceived, they usually are far from perfect. They are always born from a compromise.' Had European leaders waited for perfection, they would still have been indulging in histrionics and idle debate. Instead, they launched an admittedly imperfect association upon which they have been able to improve with the benefit of the experience of operations over the past decade.

We cannot expect to start off with some ideal or perfect arrangement. Neither can we hope to be so prescient of the future as to be

able to determine all the consequences and difficulties of integration. We can and must, of course, try to analyse and anticipate as best we can from available data, what the effects of integration may be and can be made to be, but it would be folly *par excellence* to wait for perfect foresight.

Complete integration will take some time and will involve a number of complex decisions at the highest levels but it cannot arise full-blown merely because decisive political agreements have been achieved. In practice, arrangements will have to proceed step by step and their success will be dependent upon the research and analyses of experts and officials like those present here this morning. And that is why it has been decided that this conference should be the precursor of the one of heads of governments in October in Bridgetown.

Doctors Brewster and Thomas in their study have posited the need for a regional integration policy body to give continuous direction to the integration process; I would add in the same way as the Central American Free Trade Area established the Central American Committee in 1952 only that we shall have to move with even greater despatch and speed. In our context Brewster and Thomas have designated the body as a regional commission. The name may or may not be acceptable to you and your governments but the name is unimportant. What is of vital importance is the institution, its terms of reference and scope of activity. There can be no doubt that it cannot function without a secretariat, that it must have access to or be responsible for an institute of applied research which can mobilise a wide range of professional skills – a *sine qua non* which has been referred to as ‘the fourth and final factor in the process of integration’.¹

Heavy demands will be made on skills and expertise especially in the fields of development administration where at the individual territorial levels there is a shortage. Obviously, provision will have to be made for advanced training and applied development technology.

Finally, a key institution, perhaps around which all other supporting institutions should revolve, is a regional development bank. An important part of this conference’s duty, therefore, will be to give consideration to the recommendations for the creation of a regional bank made by the U.N.D.P. team. In view of the unanimously strong support reported within the Commonwealth Caribbean, it is to be

1. The Commonwealth Caribbean Secretariat was subsequently established in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1968.

hoped that your deliberations will hasten the rapid implementation of the proposals for this institution.

One of the positive advantages of integration is that it enhances the international stature of the region: it increases its bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the world. There are those who prescribe O.A.S. status as a short-term solution to our problems – and I emphasise short-term; there are others who propose an involvement in the Latin American Common Market which is to be established in 1985 (I hope that these proponents are not suggesting that we wait that long to take action as between ourselves), but whatever arrangements may be come to, our ability to get proper and favourable terms will be dependent upon our acting as one group rather than as a number of little specks in the Caribbean sea. It is for you the technicians to analyse, evaluate and advise on the various propositions. It is for you to propose new formulae.

The present government of Guyana stands willing to support and endorse any proposition or solution which the region as a whole holds valid. We will, unlike some who preceded us, not opt out of a regional solution and indulge in dishonest rationalisations and vacuous shibboleths and clichés with which it is sought to cloak narrow political ambitions. We will not stay out and criticise, we will join and work towards the ideal. So important is the concept and goal of integration that even necessary limitations on our sovereignty are a price we are prepared to pay, the Jeremiahs notwithstanding. *We aim not at more cooperation but integration.*

We in Guyana have acted in the belief that a Caribbean free trade area is a relatively simple first stage towards the ultimate of an integrated economic community. That explains why C.A.R.I.F.T.A. was formed. It may well be that this meeting will share these perspectives and we can begin serious discussion and bargaining aimed at an expansion of C.A.R.I.F.T.A. to embrace the entire Caribbean region here represented. We have always shared this hope and the legal instrument establishing C.A.R.I.F.T.A. has made provisions for accession of other territories. In some quarters, C.A.R.I.F.T.A. has been dismissed as not being an illustrative solution to Caribbean economic problems. It is true that it is limited to three countries at the moment, but so too was the Central American Free Trade Area at the beginning.

C.A.R.I.F.T.A. contemplates much more than a free trade area. For a free trade area cannot stand still. It must either move unto a

higher level of economic unity or disintegrate. C.A.R.I.F.T.A. itself contemplates and formulates administrative machinery for dealing with the more involved problems of a greater degree of integration. These include the harmonising of industrial incentives, the adumbration of a common commercial policy and the streamlining of external tariffs in relation to the rest of the world. The agreement at the request of its signatories has been laid as a conference document and I would urge a serious examination and scrutiny. Let me say that in any case Guyana does not consider its membership of C.A.R.I.F.T.A., as constituted at the moment, an impediment to economic integration on a wider scale.

Guyanese in common with other West Indians expect from this conference action and tangible results. We take this question of integration seriously and do not look upon this conference as the occasion for an exercise in debating skills of which we have a surfeit in the Caribbean. As I have said before and in other places, Guyana is willing to place its not inconsiderable natural and other resources at the disposal of the region as a whole. Our hinterland is not a mere showcase for the passing admiration of curious anthropologists, archaeologists and tourists but a vast place to be peopled and developed. With whom better can we share our resources than with our neighbours, our brothers, our sisters? With whom do we already share a common historical experience?

May I wish this conference every success. May I hope that pragmatism and action will be your watch words. May I urge that we make this conference a landmark in our history when we as a people moved from the theoretical to the practical.



SECOND EDITION


Integrate or Perish

**Perspectives of the Heads
of Government of the
Caribbean Community and
Commonwealth Caribbean
Countries 1963-2002**

Edited by **Kenneth O. Hall**

LINDEN FORBES SAMPSON BURNHAM

FEBRUARY 20, 1923 – AUGUST 6, 1985



Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham, the son of a headmaster of Barbadian ancestry, was born in Kitty, Georgetown, on 20 February 1923. He received his early education at Kitty Methodist Primary School and in 1935 he entered Central High School where he spent two terms. After this brief period, he gained admission to Queen's College, the premier secondary school for boys at that time. At Queen's College Burnham's intellectual star soared. In 1937, he won the Percival Exhibition Award and in 1942 the prestigious Guyana Scholarship.

He could not proceed to England, as was customary at the time, to further his studies because of the Second World War. He therefore studied for the Bachelor of Arts degree externally with the University of London and gained his degree in 1944. After the war in 1947, he travelled to England and studied for the Bachelor of Laws Degree which he obtained with honours from the same University. The following year he was admitted to the Bar of the Honourable Society of Gray's Inn, London. Mr. Burnham returned to Guyana in 1949 and was admitted to the local Bar. He established himself as a brilliant lawyer and in 1959 was elected President of the Guyana Bar Association.

While a student in London, his keen interest in politics earned him the presidency of the West Indian Students' Union. He participated as a delegate to the Students' Congresses in Prague in 1947 and in Paris in 1948. Upon his return to Guyana, Mr. Burnham and Dr. Cheddi Jagan co-founded the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and were elected chairman and leader, respectively.

In 1952 Mr. Burnham was elected to the Georgetown City Council and later served as Mayor for two terms. He served as the first President of the Guyana Labour Union, the oldest trade union in the Caribbean. In 1982 he was elected president general, a position he held until his death.

In 1957, Mr. Burnham founded the People's National Congress (PNC) and served as Leader of the opposition within the legislature. Following general elections in 1964, he became Premier of Guyana under the People's National Congress/United Force Coalition Government.

When Guyana gained independence in 1966, Mr. Burnham became its first prime minister. And with the advent of a new Constitution, he was elected executive president on 15 December 1980.

As an indication of his serious commitment to West Indian integration and unity, in 1965 Mr. Burnham, joined with Premier Vere Cornwall Bird of Antigua and Premier Errol Barrow of Barbados, and discussed the possibility of the formation of a Caribbean Free Trade Association (CARIFTA). In 1967 the association became a reality. Indeed, throughout his political career Mr. Burnham never resiled from the position that West Indian and Caribbean unity was a precondition for prosperity and survival. He summarised this view elegantly when he spoke at the 1967 Meeting of the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth Caribbean: '... Let us to our own selves be true. These are the facts. This is the naked truth. Either we integrate, or we perish, unwept, unhonoured'.

The Caribbean Community followed in 1973. Mr. Burnham was regarded as 'a regional leader of utmost importance and highest esteem'. He envisioned a truly integrated Caribbean Community of independent people and worked hard towards making that vision a reality. Mr. Burnham participated with vigour and shrewdness in all of the major Conferences of the Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community, a situation which only ended with his death on 6 August 1985.

Mr. Burnham was the recipient of Guyana's highest award, the Order of Excellence in 1973 and other prestigious awards from such countries as Brazil, Cuba and Yugoslavia. In 1975, he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Dalhousie University in Canada.