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**ENGAGEMENT OF DIVERSITY
AND THE DILEMMA OF DIFFERENCE
EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION**
By Professor Rex Nettleford*

First let me welcome you all to the Commonwealth Caribbean aka the Caricom Caribbean or the former British West Indies. I have chosen the title for this contribution – *“Engagement of Diversity and the Dilemma of Difference”* as a major challenge not only for us in this chaotic, contrary, contradictory, debt-rich, oil poor, even murderous but exciting region of the world but also of the third millennium Planet we all now tenant. It is above all a microcosm of the Commonwealth which has over 50 members representing every region of the world and every economic grouping and includes some of the richest countries like the UK and Canada, some of the poorest like Sierra Leone and a couple among us here in the Caribbean, some of the biggest countries like India with a population of over 1 billion to little Tuvalu with a population of some 11,000 (or Montserrat with some 5000). But as the brand-marketing language goes, *“all are equal”* since the Commonwealth *“makes decisions by negotiation and consensus”*.

Moreover, the language insists, *“all of its 53 members are committed to the Commonwealth’s fundamental principles [set out in the Harare Declaration] of democracy, development, human rights and the rule of law”*. There is further commitment to *“gender equality and a political culture that promotes transparency, accountability and economic development”*. The lyrics are poetically proper except that the dissonance of the accompanying music gives us all pause in the thirst for peace. Yet we sing on. The government of Trinidad and Tobago has indeed wisely followed its instincts to host this remarkable inter-governmental family meeting (CHOGM), probably sending the message that the Commonwealth Caribbean, the Commonwealth and its operational methods still have much to teach the world without feeling diminished in the face of the growing might of such multilateral entities as the World Bank and the IMF which is itself visiting in these parts at this very moment.

*** Very sadly, Rex Nettleford died on February 2, 2010 so this is one of his last public addresses**

But neither of these two august institutions can do what the Commonwealth could if it systematically pursues the albeit ineffable means of preparing for the Planet human beings with the sense and sensibility to engage the reality of diversity and difference and learn to mitigate violence and hostility by learning *to agree to disagree agreeably*, one of the core values of the Westminster two-party parliamentary tradition -- in other words, to learn to live **together** rather than simply **side by side** and to transform the obscenities of a particular history into challenges for constructive living as the Commonwealth Caribbean made up of myriad transplanted souls has been challenged to do over some four centuries. The result, as I have always said, is the production of pretty creative constructive souls who would not object to their being described as part-African, part-European, part-Asian, part-Native American (sc. indigenous) but totally **Caribbean**.

Such multi-layered, multi-faceted and textured reality may well be difficult to grasp by those who have been brought up on the notion that *homogeneity* (one faith, one ethnic origin, one worldview, one sense of being, one language) is **the** principle of social organization rather than *heterogeneity* which produces the plural person, with diverse personal goals and yet capable of dealing with a sense of community that speaks to group loyalty, borderless tolerance, respect and understanding and a capacity to make things work by dialogue and compromise on the basis of coordinated social action, mutual trust and the notion that "*all o' we is one*" which is a favourite phrase you are likely to hear in this your host country – Trinidad and Tobago.

The old empire which has been creatively morphed into a gentleman's club called the Commonwealth afforded that opportunity, admittedly with much pain and suffering through slavery and indentureship but also with the priceless gain of the capacity to survive and to exist beyond survival. Trinidad may well feel that her experience should be of value to all on Planet Earth since the Commonwealth model of unity in diversity (national mottoes and anthems throughout the region speak to this aspiration – e pluribus unum), of cultural pluralism, (Creole and native languages co-exist with Standard tongues), of religious tolerance (Islam, Hinduism, spiritual Baptists, Bahai, Shango and numerous native-born native bred religious expressions thrive together not only in Trinidad but throughout the region along with inter-faith fellowship exercises) and of the possibility of peaceful resolution of conflict without resort to open military warfare or armed resistance against social injustice and chronic immiseration. These could augur well for our newly **globalised** world – a reality of the third millennium.

The rationale for current efforts (ever since Kampala) at promoting and achieving mutual respect and mutual understanding between peoples of differing race, class and creed could well be seen in terms of yet another objective, namely the forging of a reconnection between Member States in the Commonwealth through **education** and culture – education

based on interdisciplinary studies and educational interchange; and **culture** through the exercise of the creative imagination, cultural exchange involving the youth and young adults (the next generation) as well as the media and all forms of communication technology which have already brought young people worldwide together in a sphere of appreciation and a zone of relative comfort especially through music, dance, as well as through track and field, cricket and football, world cup festivals – themselves part of the Performing Arts. The Commonwealth already displays some success in these areas. But are they exploited enough in Commonwealth terms for the strengthening of bonds between the myriad nations that meet at CHOGM every two years?

Since Education is this Assembly's main concern in this Commonwealth People's Forum, the Commonwealth as a body could indeed look more at what its constituted members are doing in the use of education as a tool of growth and development in the knowledge economy which is the shared challenge of all on Planet Earth – rich and poor, developed and developing, one Third Caucasian and the two-Thirds non-Caucasian, the Western Christian civilization and those not so blessed to meet St. Peter in the land of Milk and Honey.

Many Commonwealth educators have strong views on this whole matter of an articulated educational system and the pressing need for such a system that can take our young people from cradle to grave, affording different points of entry and re-entry, and with undiminished capacities for coping with the vicissitudes of human existence. Such vicissitudes, Governments and governed both need to remember, constitute not only the acquisition of a job but also the sustaining of employment in times when rapid change in the post-industrial age will guarantee security and tenure to less and less people who may wish to hold the same job, or remain on the same career path from the time of entry into the workforce up to the time of '*retirement*'. Those of us of an older generation who could indeed enter a '*profession*' or career and actually retire in it are not likely to see as much of that again.

That is why any government policy which ties education and training narrowly to one specific job is likely to be short-sighted and counter-productive in the medium and long term. The preparation of the young to be able to critically think his/her way through changed and changing circumstances within a given skill-area and beyond, can be the only meaningful aim of educational preparation in the 21st century and the tertiary education system in the Commonwealth ignores at its peril this challenge to be diverse in its offerings from and to be imaginative enough to engage and design clusters to create critical masses for inexpensive delivery.

Vocational schools teaching auto-mechanics must take the learner beyond moving nuts and bolts to his/her knowing **why** he/she removes, adjusts, replaces those nuts or bolts. Students must learn the '*know-why*' as well as the '*know-how*'. Otherwise, a region like this one will merely continue to produce the hewers of wood and drawers of water which colonies were required all but exclusively to produce in another dispensation and against which this region struggled to liberate itself. I like to remind audiences, too, that the only time that I can recall that we had full employment in this region was under slavery – yet another paradox of paradoxes which are the bane of Caribbean life!

Universities and other Tertiary Level Institutions of the Commonwealth are endangered in the sense of being likely to be of little use in the next fifty years if they ignore the implications of such short-sightedness. Universities dare not yield to the temptation of churning out Management Studies graduates, for example, bereft of knowledge of the deeper forces of the society in which graduates must function. Such forces take on ideal form and purpose precisely at the point where people spend most of their waking lives – the workplace. Schools of engineering must produce more than a technical wonder. He or she ends up, after all, "*engineering*" situations involving human beings. His/Her emotional quotient may indeed figure more than the IQ conventionally expected from the University-trained person.

The trained lawyer without an inkling of jurisprudence or knowledge of the sociological, political and cultural realities of his arena of practice is likely to become the jackass many say the law already is. The education of such key skills for development requires more than over-specialised technical training.

The contradictions of a world in transition, after all, are merely echoing the contradictions the Commonwealth Caribbean has long faced ever since the beginning of encounters in the Americas of myriad souls from diverse cultures on foreign soil. The Commonwealth Caribbean's gut responses over time have unfortunately been ignored in favour of those demanded by colonial dictates which persist under different guises to this very day. Trinidad and the entire Commonwealth Caribbean are more than well placed and equipped to contribute to the global discourse on the role of education in human development for coping with the 21st century.

Yet, closer examination of the Commonwealth Caribbean's experience, especially of the problematique with respect to the development of the human resources through the formal educational process, confirms that the search for appropriate modalities must be projected against the background of the demands of "*economic growth and the aim of sustainable development, the transition from individual isolated membership of a society to democratic collective participation, and the relationship between the grassroots community and the*

wider society.” It is such engagement with the community throughout life that can be facilitated by the plethora of tertiary institutions located over wide geographical spaces and should be exploited to have their offerings catalyse the sense and sensibility as well as the knowledge base of their local environs. This is what those who thought up the Commonwealth of Learning hoped for.

The notion of *“learning throughout life”* is here very germane to the topic of the presumed gap that exists for example, between educational development and cultural reality, between education and the community which is the cradle of culture, itself a lifelong reality! It is something we in the Two-Thirds World must watch carefully in facing the WTO/GATS’ enthusiasm for the globalization/liberalization of higher education.

We can set up the most beautiful structures but if the actors themselves are not engaged and fully *au fait* with what they are supposed to do, too bad for the structures! There are first of all the **parents** or surrogates; then there are the **teachers**. Throughout youth and adulthood, the arena of learning takes different forms, at school, in community life, through the family, via leisure pursuits, in associations, and civic life. Strategic alliances, I quite agree, had better start from down there or else we won’t understand it elsewhere, hence my fullest sympathy with those who advocate more emphasis on early childhood education. The young adults at the tertiary level themselves come with reference points that need to be integrated with the TLI learning and operational process at that level.

This in itself is a complex configuration within which each actor must locate himself or herself building on the pillars of the learning process. A range of available information technologies as part of the communication revolution must also be taken into account, from the simple audio cassette and transistor radio through distance education teleconferencing mechanisms, to CD Rom, E-Mail and Internet. And I am seized of the recommendation by many of our educational planners who see a sophisticated electronic technology as part of academic delivery system facilitating access and cutting cost to the learner. Properly funded and imaginatively used, IT could also facilitate structural networking between Commonwealth Tertiary level Institutions. This is what those who thought up the COL hoped for with the Caribbean, Canada, S. E. Asia, Australia, regions of Africa, in the vanguard of overcoming the tyranny of distance.

None of this can or will replace the teacher who must continue to play a pivotal role in maintaining the vigour of the system of learning and delivering the central message that must be forged concerning the type of creative, constructive, peace-loving citizens a society wishes to educate or to ensure the continuity and progress of knowledge.

Teacher Training Colleges are iconic in the system and their core task of training and educating teachers is by definition paramount for it is the people whom teachers produce

who will bring thought and action to growth and development in civil society. It has to be understood, as well, that whatever the budgetary constraints faced by Commonwealth Member States in the region, whatever the seductive sounds coming from the free market camp, it remains the responsibility of public policy, of governments, to propose the direction to be followed and to enlist the greatest possible number of actors in order to succeed in a strategy that masters change.

Indeed, this kind of leadership by the State does not mean a monopoly of the functions employed to move education forward; least of all for the field to be hijacked by Ministries of Education served by unimaginative pedestrian technocrats who forget that there are a certain number of human values that need to be activated and kept alive in human-scale communities like ours. Values such as the dignity and responsibility of the individual; the freely-chosen participation of individuals in communities; equality of opportunity and the search for a common good and cultural certitude, the power of knowledge through education and training -- these can be realized through the sort of education that will trump violence and foster rational thought and peaceful reflection even in the face of temptation to violence. We are here speaking of lifelong learning beyond the classroom of course.

All the actors in the system need to be more alert in the creative response to the challenge that is already upon all Commonwealth countries. The factor of culture and its role in education have apparently given many bureaucrats and some teachers more difficulty than they have the very politicians whom we are frequently bashing. Such has been my Jamaican experience!

The educational system, with the help of those who are charged with directing it (including governments), should take full responsibility for the promotion of dynamic interaction and coordination between artistic creativity and other policy domains such as education itself, working life, urban planning, and industrial and economic development strategies for the benefit of all. A child learns the meaning of process and is better able to relate outcome to effort, if he/she is encouraged to create a poem or a song, act in a play, make up a dance, sing in a choir or play an instrument in an orchestra, as a normal part of his/her education and play some sport – whether it be cricket, football, netball or track. The Commonwealth should be the beneficiary of such orientation and ponder opportunities for the deepening and heightening of this creative impulse. The cricket-loving West Indies, Australia, South Africa, The UK, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh should all understand this.

I might remind some people that even Karl Marx – mind you, back in 1843 – did recommend some of this for people if they really wanted to escape alienation which is a breeding ground of violence. The discipline that underpins the mastery of the craft, the

demands made on continuous re-creation of effort and application, the challenges encountered on the journey to excellence, habits of realistic self-evaluation, the capacity for dealing with diversity and the dilemma of difference, whether in the performing arts or in the key branches of sports, themselves for me a performing art, constitute excellent preparation for learning to be (which is the stuff of ontology), learning to know (the substance of epistemology), and learning to live together (the essence of the creative diversity which characterizes Commonwealth existence and is about to overtake the entire world) -- all of which must serve the individual throughout his or her life.

Thinking and feeling, intellect and imagination are not mutually exclusive as every unschooled grandmother in every Commonwealth country would insist. The separation of these two states of experience into irreconcilable wholes is part of the binary syndrome of an inherited tradition of intellectual discourse and epistemological reductionism which constitute an expensive luxury for people like us in the Commonwealth Caribbean. We have survived these past 500 years on the basis of making sense of our creative diversity and a multi-sourced reality in everyday living, while heeding the "*compulsion of oneness*" which a former Commonwealth Secretary-General Shridath Ramphal reminds us is an added reality of our globalised Planet.

Commonwealth educators need to take a look, then, at the long haul of human history and locate the region where it appropriately belongs, that is on the trajectory of human '*becoming*' through social interaction.

To a former generation which has left a rich legacy for those now growing up and those yet unborn, the school and the school teacher were essential to their socialization and their life-long learning, but so was the community, lending the kind of support, psychic and material, which are essential to growth and development. Teachers were of course part of the community -- moving spirits, icons and when they were old enough, guides and care-givers along with parents and the extended family which every village or urban neighbourhood became. The strengthening of bonds between education and community makes eminent sense for it speaks to the basics of civil society rooted in trust, mutual respect, the harnessing of collective will and a fostering of that sense of fellowship without which sociability and the capacity to join forces to achieve greater ends for the good of all cannot be attained. I recommend this to the Commonwealth Foundation in assessing its educational projects.

A challenge for the Commonwealth and specifically the Commonwealth Foundation is the strengthening and rationalization of the institutional and operational networking mechanisms between the different levels and categories of educational delivery systems so

that the young can become the true beneficiaries of an articulated system of education sooner than later.

Yet another challenge is for the entire teaching profession, to put more energy into one's own education through continuous self-upgrading with a view to coping with the changes in what has been described as "*the knowledge economy.*" What one teaches, how one teaches and the impact of both on the individual student, on oneself as teacher, and on the wider society, all fall into the remit of intellectual renewal. Many who went to rather good Universities twenty-thirty years ago, are discovering that a good deal of what was learnt there may not be of much use at this point. We must stop teaching "*disciplines*" and start teaching human beings.

The honing of sense and sensibility is of no less importance and failing to appreciate this is likely to leave teachers trailing their students in the grasp of the realities in the wider world which for many is increasingly meaning the streets and what is picked up through the sound bytes of foreign radio, television and internet. An understanding of the social milieu and its tendency to nuanced shifts is therefore essential. Many of our students, if we are not careful, will outwit us any day and then we regard them as not being very bright.

The education of self in order to cope with the new and changing order – contradictory, confusing in the mixed signals it sends and irritatingly challenging – must be a priority for every member of the teaching profession. Part of that self-education has to do with acquainting self with the substance and impact of science and technology.

In developing the science and technology sensibility, we could do a great deal by starting with the environment. There is a lot of science going on out there, what with tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes and climate change. The other thing of course is that which the Rastafarians refer to as '*the structure,*' the body. Many of us know far too little about the human body. Women of course have no choice – but we mere men know very little.

A final challenge is Commonwealth educators' obligation to help shape that social vision which may well be the software that must take local priority over the hardware. What kind of society does one want for our Commonwealth countries in the foreseeable future? Should it be a society tenanted by citizens whose yields in the production of goods and services are high while they remain low on values and sensibility. Seeing the output from schools and colleges as mere statistical units for the production process is the clearest sign that the all-important emancipation from mental slavery and colonialism is yet to be achieved.

A lop-sided society which makes nonsense of social justice for the mass of the population hasn't a ghost of a chance eking out of a population that is made to feel less than good in the scheme of things, the dedication and commitment to country and society on which that high productivity depends. What kind of structure is needed to eliminate such afflictions and foster positive outcomes? And how can the Commonwealth help in this?

That sense of self-worth, that self-esteem which bolsters the confidence in self, leading to giving of self to the growth and development of society through trust in co-ordinated action is necessary. As I have repeatedly said, it is possible only when we are able to discover and to keep re-discovering who we really are, how our lives have been forged from that textured history of the past half a millennium and how our place is determined in the world – a complex, textured groping world, itself in search of certitude and ways of coming to terms with the physical environment which we have all despoiled and degraded. That process for so many of the majority of our people, really starts to make sense in the final formal educational preparation for life.

The anxiety is the result clearly of an acute sense of crisis about the future of self and society. That anxiety is universal. Let me yet again quote a late 20th century assessment of the state of affairs by a well-known policy studies expert – *“The decline of trust and sociability in the United States is evident in any number of changes in American society. The rise of violent crime and civil litigation, the breakdown of the family structure, the decline of a wide range of intermediate social structures like neighbourhoods, churches, unions, clubs, and charities; and the general sense among Americans of a lack of shared values and community with those around them.”* The writer is Francis Fukuyama.

Of course, he could be writing about Jamaica, or Trinidad, or any of the bigger territories in the Commonwealth Caribbean. A creative response to this constitutes the social vision which I am challenging our educators at all levels but especially at the tertiary to help shape and implement.

I was happy to see that while conceding the reality of the pursuit of education for the job market, a Trinidadian UWI colleague and Pro-Vice Chancellor Bho Tewarie settled for the albeit sometimes lonely long distance running that education must be seen to be in challenging takers right up to the finishing line. He writes and, I concur, *“the challenge for a University [and we can add an articulated education system of which a university is a part] the challenge for a University.....is to produce **thinkers** who can also **make decisions, act and create; [as well as to produce] contributors to society who can also question the assumptions which drive that society”***. Education in our Commonwealth ignores/avoids this challenge at its peril.

Professor the Hon. Rex Nettleford, OM, OCC

Professor the Hon. Rex Nettleford, a Vice Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies, was a well-known Caribbean scholar, cultural activist, trade union educator, political analyst and international consultant in the fields of development and intercultural learning as in **UNESCO, OAS, OHCHR**, and the Canada-based International Development Research Centre (**IDRC**) of which he was a Founding Governor. A former Rhodes Scholar and well published author in the areas of history, politics and culture, he was an Ambassador-at-large for his native Jamaica, a Distinguished Fellow of the University of the West Indies School of Graduate Studies, a Fellow of the Institute of Jamaica and of Oriel College (Oxford) with honorary doctorates from several universities on both sides of the Atlantic, including Oxford and Sheffield (UK) and University of Toronto and Queens University (Canada). In 2006, he served as a Member of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group on Respect and Understanding and was a Mandate Holder of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent based in Geneva. He was also a founder, the current artistic director and principal choreographer of the widely-acclaimed National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica. He died on February 2, 2010, ten weeks after delivering the above address.