Presentation of the Book

THE CARIBBEAN ON THE EDGE

The Political Stress of Stability, Equality and Diplomacy

By Winston Dookeran

Quotes by ACS Secretary General, Rodolfo Sabonge:

It is an honour for me to be part of this distinguished group of presenters. As I read "*The Caribbean on the Edge*", I have to admit that I could feel the anguish, the sensibility, and the love that Professor Dookeran clearly holds for the baribbean; but also, because it is an anthology; the evidence of a lifetime dedicated to the study and analysis of the social and economic issues that affect the Caribbean. This book tells the story of his relentless search for solutions to the Caribbean´s problems.

As he states, "*The Caribbean is a complex region, characterized by great disparities in size, population, geography, history, language, religion, race, and politics*."

In my view, this two line description of the Caribbean lets us see through a small window his appreciation of the myriad facets of the object of his lifelong subject of study the Caribbean- a beautiful, fragile but promising region with a tormented soul, distressed from an unjust past and full of inequalities, which make it difficult to think of a prosperous future. And it is in light of these afflictions that his anthology allows us to see the humanist behind the author, the man seeking to improve the quality of life of people, by providing equal opportunities to all, and eliminating injustice, so that the region can flourish as an important player in the international context.

As I read the book, I couldn´t help remembering a quote by Ted Kennedy: "*Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their peers, the censure of their colleagues, and the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change."*

I can see through reading his book that Prof. Dookeran is one of those brave man with moral courage who seeks to change a region that yields most painfully to change.

I have to say that since my very first encounter with Professor Dookeran as Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States I identified our convergence of opinion- our shared belief that the ACS has the potential to be a catalyst for convergence. It is a space that brings all the countries of the Greater Caribbean together despite their difference in size, population, or GDP, so that no one remains behind.

It is for that reason that I was not in the least surprised that the book has many references to the ACS. I am going to read some of them, and then briefly explain what we are doing in some of the areas mentioned in the book.

- Page 32, under the title, The Caribbean as a Buffer Zone in Diplomacy, he states that "*The Caribbean must work within the realities of the new global economy, and a policy environment must arise to provide a development buffer zone, as we strive to emerge on a higher international platform. In this context the establishment of the Association*

of Caribbean States can be seen, not as an integration process per se, but as an attempt to strengthen the region's negotiating position in international diplomacy. This poses an opportunity for the Caribbean to move away from its traditional posture of protest diplomacy towards a more affirmative stance in which vital interests are identified and promoted in anticipation of changing balances in world politics."

On another paragraph in Page 39, under the title: "on Changing Roles in a Changing World", Prof. Dookeran says:

- *"CARICOM, although it may have reached its limits and, in economic terms, "come to a dead-end", may be widened beyond Suriname to include the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The ACS, like a "medicine in search for a disease," is looking for its own platform; the stage is perhaps set for the emergence of a different notion of the regional state as a vehicle for creating political and negotiating space in the international arena. Perhaps, Keohane's distinction between "operational" and "formal" sovereignty may now be incorporated in the new theoretical construct for institutional behaviour in the Caribbean region. ."*

In page 47, under the title: Building Negotiating Space, again Prof. Dookeran makes reference to the ACS:

- *"The Association of Caribbean States, created soon after the West Indian Commission report had recommended that CARICOM achieve greater cooperation and economic integration within the Caribbean Basin, was an effort to respond to global conditions." But, he clarifies that, "without an explicit agenda or clearly identified targets, the precise function of ACS is unclear, and it is in danger of becoming an expansion of outdated and ineffective structures that cannot deal with the present crisis."*

And, in page 48 under the title Is There Scope for "Non-sovereign" Regional States? He states:

- *"The hurdles – historical and contemporary – facing a regional state in the Caribbean are huge, which has led to the establishment of surrogate bodies and associations to provide platforms for diplomatic leverage. The Association of Caribbean States is one such creation….Shifting from the orthodox protest diplomacy towards a more affirmative stance allows for greater cooperation in building resilience…"*

There are many more references to the ACS throughout the book, that I could quote but instead, I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on what we are doing in the Association to address and fulfil some of Prof. Dookeran´ s expectations.

When I was designated Secretary General, the first thing I did was a Strategic Diagnosis, in which I recognized many of the dilemmas mentioned in Prof. Dookeran' s book. In the first meeting I held with our Executive Board, I proposed to do a Strategic Planning Exercise, to assess the New World Order, the new realities, and redefine the Association's Vision and Mission, to satisfy the best interests of its Members. In the first meeting of our Ministerial Council, I presented a white paper called "Strategic Assessment of the ACS" which served as base to discuss the development of a new action plan.

Maybe my background as planner allowed me to recognize early on what Prof. Dookeran says in his book, the ACS is a "*medicine looking for an illness*". But what puzzled me is that one doesn´t need to look far much for the illnesses- the dramatic socio-economic situation plaguing the Region, and exacerbated by the COVID Pandemic Climate Change were clear symptoms.

In the past 6 months we have been working on our new action plan. Early on it was recognized that three years was too short a period for planning, so for the first time the Action Plan that

will be tabled for approval by the Ministerial Council next week, is a six year one. Maybe the action plan doesn't directly address trade integration or convergence, but it does approach these critical enabling exercises from several fronts.

With a strong emphasis on actions to improve the competitiveness of the region, the Plan establishes digital transformation and the improvement of Communications and Information Technology (ICT) as crosscutting themes, recognising that these are the basis for the knowledge based economy mentioned by Prof. Dookeran in the book. The action plan includes the development of an integrated transport and logistics strategy, which is critical to improving connectivity in the region; also mentioned in the book, and also includes actions to better manage and adapt to the impact of climate change and thereby reduce disaster risks, and accelerate recovery of the tourism industry in a sustainable manner. We are also including an action to support the Caribbean Development Bank's initiative to develop and establish a resiliency index which could be used as a better measure of States' vulnerability, also mentioned in the book.

And, finally, one of the most important aspects of our proposed action plan- the action that best addresses the argument for a regional state, in the operational sense is the development of Regional Public Private Partnerships, not only for infrastructure, but also for services.

This in recognition that transport and logistical services, when driven by market forces, will provide services only if they are profitable. In the case of this region, profitability is not a driver that will guarantee development because of the low density of demand. We cannot depend on the public sector either, because most governments, after COVID, are not in the position to acquire debt, much less operate and manage transport and logistics services with a negative cash flow. Here is where I see the potential of the beginning of a regional state, with the creation of a multi country Public Private Partnership for maritime and air services enabled by a regional technological platform which could also be developed through a PPP.

In a newly multipolar world that demands stronger regional institutions to maintain balance, there is a role for the Caribbean despite its history of fracture. This is the hope held up by Professor Dookeran in his book- the hope of convergence - practical and ideological - to bridge the "disparities in size, population, geography, history, language, religion, race, and politics" and transform them from complexities into assets; from disease into antibodies. He alludes in his book to the role of ACS in this healing process. 28 years after its founding, I believe the ACS is poised to play its role. I look forward to the Professor's next book analysing the effect of this 'medicinal' integration and convergence. Perhaps Professor, if I might propose a title, I would submit "The Renaissance of the Caribbean".

Thank you