



**Keynote Address at the Inaugural Graduation Ceremony of the Five Islands Campus of the University of the West Indies on 10th January 2021
by the Honourable Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda**

Colleague Minister/s

Sir Hillary Beckles - Vice Chancellor

Sir Aziz Hadeed - Chairman UWI FI

Professor - Principal

Other Distinguished guests and

Graduands

This is an historic occasion.

For the first time since the University College of the West Indies was created in Jamaica in 1948; a campus exists on Antigua to serve especially the people of the Leeward and Windward Islands.

Today, this Five Islands Campus – the fourth landed campus to be established in 71 years – holds its Inaugural Graduation Ceremony.

In doing so, UWI further fulfils its mandate: “To advance education and create knowledge through excellence in teaching, research, innovation, public service, intellectual leadership and outreach in order to support the inclusive development of the Caribbean region and beyond, including its social, economic, political, cultural and environmental aspects”.

Those who graduate today have become a part of history.

Their names will forever be emblazoned in the history of this campus, in the

history of the University of the West Indies, in the history of the Leeward and Windward Islands, and in the history of the West Indian people.

In delivering this keynote address at the Five Islands Campus, I perform a role, carried out at the very first Presentation of Graduates on Tuesday, January 13th, 1953 at the then University College of the West Indies at its Mona Campus in Jamaica, by Sir Raymond Priestly, the then Chancellor of Birmingham University and a member of the Council of UWI.

He described the graduates as “the first of a few”.

For even though he was a member of the British Irvine Committee that recommended the creation of a University of the West Indies, he could not envisage University education in our region becoming accessible to more than a few.

He could not foresee the thirst for knowledge and advancement that existed within the subjugated West Indian people and the ambitious West Indian leadership.

But our people understood then, what our people appreciate now; that education is the key to both individual and national development.

They wanted the highest possible level of education so that they could compete with the best in the world, proving their ability, and using their capacity to raise-up themselves and their people from the underdevelopment in which they languished.

That is why in a span of 73 years this year, UWI has produced over 230,000 graduates.

That is no easy accomplishment.

Among those graduates are Emmy Award and Man Booker Prize winners, a Nobel Prize Laureate, entrepreneurs and Chief Executive Officers, academics, specialist doctors around the world, and leaders of many Caribbean nations across all sectors of our West Indian community.

Sir Raymond can be forgiven for his view in 1953 that University education

would be for the few, because, as he observed with great cogency then, a University education “is an expensive ideal that the West Indies could barely afford, especially in an inflationary world”.

In that regard, nothing has changed.

The cost of providing a University and a University education, for which many thousands thirst and which is vital to the development of our countries, has increased exponentially over the last 7 decades.

Finding the money now to continue to provide it, in a world paralyzed and battered by the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult and challenging.

The World Bank estimates that, because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, about 30% of the world's emerging and developing countries have lost at least 10 years of income gains per resident.

This has resulted in what the Bank describes as a "lost decade of growth" for these nations.

Further, the bank estimates that the global economy will be around 5.3% smaller - about \$4.7 trillion - in 2021, than if it had expanded along pre-pandemic lines.

Unfortunately, the economies of our countries, that are served by UWI, are among the hardest hit.

But despite these brutal circumstances, the provision of University education is not a task from which West Indian governments can resile, any more than it is an ambition that the West Indian people should abandon. In 1953, even as he acknowledged that the cost of a University education would be an “expensive ideal”, Sir Raymond also recognised that "anything less would be a betrayal of our community whose destiny ought to be great”.

My government believes in this great destiny for our people and formulated a vision to transform Antigua & Barbuda into an economic powerhouse in the Caribbean.

However, we recognized that access to a university education, was quintessential to the sustained advancement of our nation and the achievement of our vision.

That is why we prioritised the establishment of UWI Five Islands Campus, at great costs and sacrifice, to facilitate the development of Antigua & Barbuda and the OECS sub-region as a whole.

Now – more than ever in our history – the observation of Sir Raymond is valid, pertinent, and compelling.

I repeat what he said: Anything less than providing University education would be a betrayal of our community whose destiny ought to be great.

Our countries need our educated and skilled people to fortify existing industries, create new ones, contribute to the diversification of our economies, to broaden the space for wealth creation and ownership, and to increase our competitiveness in the global community.

That need existed even before the epoch of COVID-19.

That is why, against all the odds, my Government was determined to establish a University on Antigua, to serve our people and the people of our neighbouring states.

It is why we allied with UWI and why we spent scarce resources on the establishment of this Five Islands Campus.

We were determined that neither our people, nor our nation would be left behind.

And, we resolved that we would bring the University to the people so that all, who wished to do so, could seize the opportunity for higher learning and greater knowledge, to improve their lives and strengthen the foundations of our nation.

I know, that I speak for my Government and the people of Antigua and Barbuda when I say that we have no regret over the investment we made in UWI Five

Islands.

It was an investment in the upliftment of our people, and of our nation.

There can be no cause more noble, no pursuit more fulfilling, no accomplishment more joyous. This Inaugural Graduation Ceremony, though small, attests to the worthiness and wisdom of our investment.

Today, we graduate 6 persons with a post-graduate diploma in Education.

It is a small step in numbers, but a great leap in achievement.

These six graduates are “the first of the many” who will go on to educate scores of others in the decades to come, adding to the wealth of knowledge and capacity within our country.

It is significant that at the 1953 ceremony of the University College of the West Indies, only 11 persons graduated. However, none were women. Today’s graduation ceremony shows how far we have come, in achieving the inclusion of women at all levels of our development process.

Another significant thing about the 1953 ceremony, was that of the 11 graduates, seven were Jamaican, two Barbadian and two Guyanese.

The only representation of the Leeward and Windward Islands, was among the officials not among the graduates.

They included St Lucian Garnet Gordon, representing the Windward Islands, and Antiguan S.T. Christian, representing the Leewards.

However, while no Antiguan and Barbudan National was among the first graduates in 1953, three nationals of Antigua and Barbuda were among to the first cohort of students and were very much a part of the student body of the University.

They were from the Faculty of Medical Sciences – the first faculty to be established at the University College in 1948.

But because their medical courses lasted six years, they did not graduate until 1954. The first graduates of the University in 1953. were from the second

Faculty that the University College established in 1949.

That was the Faculty of Natural Sciences whose students did three-year courses and graduated in 1953 – one year ahead of the medical students.

But that group of medical students – the class of 1948 – was unique.

It was 33 of them, of whom 10 were women.

And among the 33, were 3 Antigua and Barbuda Nationals – two men and one woman.

The men were Dr. Donald E. Christian and Dr. R. Alford Walwyn.

The lone Antiguan woman was - Dr Ruby Lake Richards.

Today, with special pride, we remember all three of these distinguished medical practitioners – born of our soil.

They came from one of the smallest territories of the West Indies but showed that they were the equal of all.

We applaud the mark they made and the service they gave.

But because all our graduands today are women, we recall Dr. Ruby Lake-Richards more especially.

She broke the glass ceiling, pushed the frontiers of women's achievement, and helped pave the path for today's women, to become leaders in all that they pursue. She helped to prove that gender is no obstacle to ability and should be no barrier to equality with men in every aspect of human endeavor.

I spoke with Dr Ruby Lake Richards yesterday and told her of this historic occasion, at which the first indigenous University campus in Antigua is holding its first graduating ceremony – of which all six graduands are women.

Dr Lake Richards was delighted.

Her own career took her to Canada where she served in hospitals as a general practitioner and subsequently as a respected psychiatrist until she retired at age 93.

Presently, at the age of 98, and with her brain as sharp as it ever was, she asked me to convey her congratulations to our six female graduands, and to tell them

that, as the first graduates, they are paving the way for those who follow.

She also said that in today's world, there is every opportunity for women to succeed and that they should seize every opportunity with both hands.

She also sent you – the graduands – her very best wishes in their future endeavours.

My Government is committed to the upliftment and empowerment of women in our society, which we want to be gender-equal in all sectors.

Consequently, we applaud the success of our women in seizing educational opportunities – a trend which is noticeable throughout the campuses of UWI.

It is amazing that the females are today outperforming the males; but the under achievement of our males is becoming increasingly worrisome.

The latter is an issue that currently occupies the attention of the Cabinet, as we seek to devise strategies to increase the matriculation and graduation of more males with a university degree.

Whereas all work add to national productivity and is embraced; more of our young males need to increase their ambition from climbing the back of a truck to work on a construction site, to achieving a university degree.

Today, I say to our women graduates and our women students – well done and congratulations. And I trust that the males will emulate your success.

Your hard work is paying off, and you are taking your rightful place as equal partners to men in our societies, that need the contribution and hard work of both. Ladies and Gentlemen, in part, it is the under-representation of the people

of the Leeward and Windward Islands at the Mona Campus in Jamaica and subsequently at the Trinidad St Augustine Campus and the Barbados Cave Hill Campus, that fanned the flame of ambition for this Five Islands Campus, to serve the needs of the Windward and Leeward Islands more particularly.

I remind everyone that, having started operations in September 2019 – only 18 months ago - with 148 students, today, the Five Islands Campus has over 300 students across three schools and several exciting programmes, including Management, Education, and Nursing.

Our plan is to build on these programmes to offer courses in 2022 in areas such as Corporate Finance, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, Midwifery, Special Education, Services Management and climate studies. That is why, even as my Government faces formidable challenges in public health, a daunting debt overhang, structural financial problems, as we try recover our economy from this still threatening COVID 19 environment; we will not forsake this Five Islands Campus.

While, in 2021, we will work toward the restoration of our economy by limiting the spread of the Corona Virus and a swift roll-out of vaccines to immunize our community; we know that the enhanced knowledge base of our people remains a vital ladder in our climb out of the today's precarious circumstances.

Therefore, I give the undertaking today that my Government will do all in its power, to provide funding for further infrastructural development and expansion of the Five Islands campus.

We will also work assiduously to finance the operational budget of the campus over the next five years, and we will deepen our partnership with UWI to jointly devise solutions to major developmental issues.

In pursuing these policies, we will also seek the fullest participation of the private sector in Antigua and Barbuda and neighbouring territories, who will benefit from the wider and deeper pool of knowledgeable persons from which they can draw.

Education remains at the centre of our developmental aspirations, and our people at the heart of its attainment.

Our objective is to get ahead of the longer economic impact of the pandemic, by promoting investments to improve technology, health care, and, importantly, education.

This race will not be won by the swift; the prize will go to those with the resilience and stamina for the longer haul.

The painstaking path ahead of us will require sacrifice and patience, but most of all, it will require determination and stick- ability to overcome.

Previous generations overcame centuries of slavery and exploitation, repression, and oppression, to lay the foundations for the modern societies we have seen constructed in only six decades of self-government in our region.

That's who we are as West Indians.

We have within us the same spirit that motivated our fore parents to fight for a better life, not just for themselves, but for the generations that followed.

Today, our generation stands as the principal beneficiary.

We are better educated and more competitive because our forefathers blazed the trail for our upliftment.

I know that every graduate of this Campus will want to blaze their own trail.

But, you must recall that each of you will leave this place, certified and more knowledgeable, because a previous generation cleared the way for you; gave you the opportunity, and allowed you to stand on their shoulders.

I hope that is something our graduands will keep in their minds, as they walk across the stage today: that gratification comes with helping someone find their path; for making yourself useful not just to yourself, but to others.

For you haven't just earned new opportunities with your Diplomas, you've also earned new responsibilities with them.

I recall the well-known biblical counsel in Luke Chapter 12, verse 48: "To those to whom much is given, much will be required".

I congratulate each graduand on the successful completion of your course of study. I congratulate: - Natisha Alie-Grant- Jerusha Baynes - Shanique Gumbs- Marsha Lay-Jarvis - Lakisha Mack- Launee Richards on your achievement of a post graduate qualification, that would increase your marketability and stand you in good stead throughout your lives.

You have written yourselves into the annals of this Campus' history.

In the decades to come, as the early beginnings of the Five Islands campus will be recalled, your names will glow brightly as its first stars.

Now, you must go forth, recognising that you must play a meaningful role in our Country whose destiny, as Sir Raymond Priestly said, ought to be great.

But, it will only be great, if we resolve to make it so.

We can emerge from our current circumstances, stronger, bigger, better and more vibrant than before.

You who graduate today – and those who benefit from the Campus' teaching - have the tools to help to make the future of our OECS sub-region brighter; by embracing the urgency of now and to utilize your knowledge, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovativeness in building well diversified, highly productive and value driven economies in the subregion.

I urge the you, the graduands to do so by stepping out boldly, compassionately and purposefully in making your contribution to nation building.

I wish each of you Gods speed and good fortune in your life's journey.

Finally, I urge everyone to remain vigilant and to stay safe and healthy during this time of COVID.

I thank you.