

**MESSAGE TO THE 40TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF
THE CARIBBEAN PUBLIC SERVICES ASSOCIATION
BY PRESIDENT PATRICK M. YARDE
JULY 11, 2010**

Greetings!

Mr. Chairman, His Excellency Samuel A. Hinds, Acting President of Guyana, Honourable Ministers, Leader of the Opposition Mr. Robert Corbin, Members of Parliament, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, other Distinguished Guest, Special Invitees, Delegates and Observers of the 40th Annual Conference of the Caribbean Public Services Association, Trade Union Leaders, Members of the GPSU, Ladies and Gentlemen. Comrades I wish to express through the Acting President Mr. Samuel Hinds to the Government our appreciation for the support and assistance given to the Union on this occasion. I also wish to express special thanks to the Dr. Nanda Gopaul, Permanent Secretary, Public Service Ministry, for the invaluable support and co-operation given in organising this Conference.

Fourteen (14) years ago, I shared the podium with the late Dr. Cheddi Jagan when the 26th Annual Conference of the Caribbean Public Services Association was hosted by the Guyana Public Service Union in Guyana. On that occasion I expressed the need for the harmonious government and public service relationship; today that call is still relevant. One of our current concerns is to retain benefits which were hard fought for and won over the years at great sacrifice.

Ladies and gentlemen at a time when the focus is beginning to be turned away from World Cup Football activity in South Africa, and at a time when Caribbean leaders have just concluded discussions in the northern Caribbean towards a more united and therefore stronger region, the men and women, who keep the wheels of government turning throughout our islands and territories, are meeting at the Southern end and the focus is turned to us, as we of the Caribbean Public Services Association are meeting at the home of the Caribbean Community Secretariat and in a country with a very solid tradition of leadership in the regional movement.

There is something appropriate about convening this annual meeting, which is celebrating 40 years of regional collaboration among the public service unions of the Caribbean, in the home of the Caribbean Community, the headquarters of the Secretariat. And convening in a country which is one of the founders of the regional movement and which has demonstrated a bold commitment to regional integration over all of those four decades.

It is this sense of commitment to the region that has made the executives and membership of the Guyana Public Service Union look forward so anxiously to having our colleagues among us and has led to the enthusiasm with which our small organizing committee, with extremely limited resources, has attempted to put together a programme to ensure that your stay with us will be comfortable and that you enjoy the hospitality for which Guyana has become famous.

You must be comfortable, you must enjoy the hospitality, but you must not lose sight of our mission over the next few days.

It is imperative that we remind ourselves of the main purpose of the meeting in Guyana at this time under the aegis of the 40th Annual Conference of the Caribbean Public Services Association. We could undoubtedly be proud of the fact that the association has survived and served over a period of four decades, during which time there has been recognition of its invaluable services to Caribbean Public Services workers and the community as a whole.

Having established the firm foundation, our objective must be that by the end of our exercises this week, we would have arrived at concrete recommendations and suggestions designed to further the interest of our membership.

In this respect the aims and objectives of the Caribbean Public Services Association (CPSA) which prominently includes the promotion and encouragement of closer unity among Public Service Trade Unions and/or Associations in the Caribbean Region; collection, collation and dissemination of information to member organizations and the provision of technical assistance to member organizations in respect of their efforts to protect the rights and privileges of their members should remain foremost in our minds during the course of our deliberations.

All of us should be aware of the fact that the environment in which we function is dynamic, challenging and ever changing.

This is clearly exemplified by the fact that the impact of the global crisis facing the economies of states has not only devastated even the more advanced and developed states and has certainly not passed us by. It is a reflection of the reality that we in the Caribbean are always in danger of “catching a cold” from the sneezes of the developed states, with serious adverse consequences for employment opportunities, conditions of service and the welfare of all employees including those located in the public service. Therein lies an important response that is expected from us to combat and overcome some of these negative consequences.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of a suitable response from us.

As our aims and objectives incorporate the provision of technical assistance to member organizations, it is imperative that we cooperate and collaborate in order to achieve an adequate understanding of the realities facing our communities at this time and strive to arrive at ways and means of addressing and combating our common problems.

Some say that we tend to be reactive rather than proactive in responding to such situations and challenges. However, our strategies are usually the consequence of our failure to elicit positive and constructive responses from the political directorate who, in many instances, appropriate unto themselves almost exclusive control of national development to the exclusion of participation and inputs from important stakeholders, including even the representatives of workers. They tend to overlook the fact that implementation of policies and projects are important components of the planning exercise in which processes public employees usually should have important roles and responsibilities. Be that as it may they tend not to fully accept responsibility and accountability when failures result from their exclusive and arbitrarily approach but blame public servants for failures.

We, as an organization, are fully conscious of the need for a collaborative and cooperative relationship between the public employer and the public employee and have not been complacent in these matters. Thus, history reveals that we were active participants in exercises designed to promote these ideals. In specific terms members of our organization were prominently involved in forums such as that convened, by the International Labour Organisation Subregional Office of the Caribbean (ILO/USDOL) under the “Programme for the Promotion of Management-Labour Cooperation”, in association with the Government of Antigua and Barbuda and the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration (CARICAD), held in Antigua and Barbuda between May 19 – 23, 2003. On that occasion the participants included Heads of Public Service Commissions, Heads of Public Service Unions, and Heads of Public Service Ministries throughout the region. We were fortunate to benefit from the participation of a number of experts from different parts of the globe. A number of useful and important recommendations and suggestions were made and recorded at the end of that seminar which had, as one of its main objectives, the promotion of harmonious relationships between the public employer and its employees.

In keeping with traditional patterns of behavior in our societies we have failed to follow up and implement those very crucial recommendations which required cooperation from both sides of the public enterprise.

We are therefore once again confronted with the necessity of facing and addressing many of the problems which were previously addressed.

We have witnessed hasty attempts to establish Revenue Authorities in Trinidad and Tobago and St. Lucia outside of the framework of the regular and traditional public service without the involvement and meaningful participation of the legitimate representatives of the workers. The interest of public servants in this development resides in the fact that it has serious negative consequences for them in terms of their career prospects, superannuation benefits and future welfare and wellbeing.

It is clearly designed as a means of undermining the position, role and status of public servants and gaining political control and influence over them to the detriment of society as a whole since one of its effects is the undermining of provisions of the constitution designed for the protection of categories of public service workers.

There appears that there is a lack of appreciation by several public authorities in the Caribbean including Guyana to adhering to certain international treaties as is exemplified in the failure to give adequate recognition to numerous Conventions of the International Labour Organisation.

To the same effect is the tendency to resort to the employment of workers in the public service on contract and such appointments against even permanent established posts in the public service – (a growing phenomenon here in Guyana).

It has assumed monstrous proportions and is designed to keep public service workers in line and in a situation of uncertainty.

We in Guyana are faced with erosions of the collective labour agreement process. For example the integral role of the Public Service Commission as established in the constitution pertaining to the recruitment, appointment, promotion, transfer and discipline of those falling within its jurisdiction are dealt with fairly and equitably has been undermined in a number of cases.

Grievances resulting from the activities of the Commission and/or its failure to act have had to be taken to the High Court for redress. Relatedly, there has been a failure to appoint and activate the also constitutionally grounded Public Service Appellate Tribunal which is itself designed to deal with appeals from the Public Service Commission.

Also the arbitration process, intended as an important element and step in the collective labour agreement process, has also been effectively undermined by failure of the government either to agree to embarking on the process or indulging in aborting it and unilaterally imposing its wishes in regard to elements of the collective labour agreement.

Since the employer of our members is also the Government of the day, and we have got to deal with a peculiar situation where differences contribute to their suspicion, discomfort and sense of insecurity, which in turn, result in a political response rather than a matured professional engagement to seek a solution.

We must use this opportunity to advance the virtues of the Trade Union Movement since it is on occasions like this, when members of the working class are in need, they recognize those who are sincerely caring and concerned about their welfare and wellbeing. We are authentically and strategically placed and also that vehicle of sincerity that is there to reach out to them.

We must be proactive and innovative and be constantly seeking enlightened ways to be relevant and effective in discharging our duties.

We must be fearless and determined in standing up for our beliefs and in defence of our members.

The foregoing is among the matters in which you would no doubt be deliberating on during the course of this Conference. Ever mindful of the fact that you are also important members of society with interest beyond those relating to your employment in the public sector, provision is made in the programme for opportunities to deliberate on many other issues affecting your status as citizens both of your state and of the Caribbean. Thus, items pertaining to Women and Young Workers, gender issues, and education are among those for consideration during the Conference.

During the course of the Conference it is desirable that we bear in mind as we paraphrase the admonition of the ILO during the seminar which was held in Antigua and Barbuda in May 2003 that the need for social dialogue and consultation in forging national consensus on employment and labour relations in the public service and on other issues of social and economic importance in securing decent work for all the people of the region be recognized.

The position of our association must be that we stand ready to play a more active part in the process.

These are some of the issues, some of the challenges which confront us.

The issues and challenges require from us, indeed demand from us thoughtful, creative and practical responses.

We are now in 2010, and we might have been operating the same way 40 years ago. Circumstances have definitely changed. We are not living in the same Caribbean of 1970. We must not be left behind. We are constantly faced with the threat of becoming useless and incapable of promoting and representing the welfare and interest of our members.

Now is the time for introspection; the time to stand back and see ourselves in proper perspective...to ask ourselves: can we, as we are today, be as effective as we need to be.

The question is: how can we, after one decade in the twenty-first century, make ourselves more relevant and more able to be effective in the changed and ever changing circumstances.

Are we capable of making the changes to make ourselves more relevant.

We must be rejuvenated if we are to effectively face the challenges. We must be relevant to the circumstances of today.

We, who form the membership, would justifiably feel that the Caribbean Public Service Association, after forty years of service, has both a distinguished heritage and a bright and exciting future.

We have, in accepting the Conference's theme, accepted the responsibility to work together to conquer the challenges facing us.

We must take advantage of the aggregate of intelligence, experience and genuine interest in the Caribbean which have come together here in Guyana. We undoubtedly have the talent and the ability to make a critical assessment of our unions, our programmes and our practices to see how they can be improved.

Like the man says: We can do it. We cannot just sit down and say “we have achieved.”

As much as we have achieved, I do honestly and sincerely believe that the best days of the Caribbean Public Service Association are still ahead.

My wish, as President, is that this Annual Conference in Georgetown will chart the course for the development of an even more progressive and productive CPSA, bringing benefits to our membership, to our individual unions and to the people of the region whom we have pledged ourselves to serve.

Years from now, when we ponder on the significant strides made, we will look back, with satisfaction, at the time spent in mid July 2010 in Georgetown, Guyana when we gave new energy to the CPSA.

May the spirit of Caribbean unity and Public Service Union solidarity be with us throughout this Conference.