



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

THE INSTALLATION CEREMONY OF
MR. ROBERT BERMUDEZ
AS THE SIXTH CHANCELLOR OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 16, 2017 AT 6:00 P.M.
DAAGA AUDITORIUM,
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES,
ST. AUGUSTINE CAMPUS, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

My fellow West Indians I would like to start by acknowledging a great West Indian who is with us today, our former Chancellor, Sir George Alleyne, someone who has dedicated his life to the service of his country, this region and particularly this University. I am the beneficiary of his distinguished legacy. I have followed three basic rules for all of my career: stay focused on your core competence, keep your head down and keep your mouth shut. This evening I am jettisoning these rules forever.

I started life as a baker and to this day still see myself as such. Standing here before you as Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, makes me marvel yet again at the vagaries of life. I am deeply conscious of the responsibility of this office and I wish to thank the University Council for bestowing this extraordinary honour upon me.

In trusting its leadership to someone outside of academia, the University has made a clear statement that, as it enters its 70th year, it is recalibrating itself to the demands of the future. Its newly adopted strategic plan stands on three pillars: access, alignment, and agility. I fully endorse the plan and the framework that has been put in place to ensure its timely implementation.

As the University approaches this milestone, most of our contributing countries have already, or are about to celebrate their 50th year of independence or self-government. For those of us who remember the glorious evenings when the Union Jack was lowered and our national flags were run up, it was a time of great excitement and expectation. Also a time of much change and uncertainty: Would independence work? Could we govern ourselves? There was a view that this experiment would end in failure. The colonial powers had their doubts, based on the number of restrictions and checks placed in our constitutions.

As was to be expected, in the last 50 years we have faced many challenges and weathered many storms. Some of them of our own making, some outside of our control. However, today we can celebrate a successful outcome; we have grown into functioning noisy democracies, with fair and

free elections, and an unfettered right to free speech. All in all, we are a free people with a system of governance, though not perfect, the envy of many.

The UWI played a pivotal role in building the institutional fabric of our democracies. It has trained our leaders in every field, the lawyers, the physicians, the public servants, the clerics, the teachers, the nurses, the engineers and dare I forget, the politicians and heads of state. The UWI was instrumental in providing the critical ingredient to our success: educated, self-assured young people, ready and willing to serve, committed to our cause. If that was the goal in 1948 for establishing the UCWI, then the UWI has been a resounding success.

By any measure, we have made a success of ourselves. We have improved our standard of living, we have improved our healthcare, we have improved access to education, we have improved our infrastructure. We have been successful. We may be materially poor when compared to our large rich neighbours but we are not backward! We are rich in talent!

In our exuberance and self-confidence we often forget that we are only five million souls. Yet we have made our mark; in sport, in music, in the arts, in academia we punch well above our weight. Marley, Rihanna, Bolt... these are global icons, known and loved by million. Less well known but equally astounding are our Nobel Laureates!

I mention these larger than life figures only to illustrate those who have achieved global prominence. There are tens of thousands of West Indians who have achieved remarkable success in every field, many of them alumni of this University.

Anniversaries are times of celebration but they must also be used for reflection and for rededication. The world around us is changing at an astonishing pace and every indication is that change will accelerate exponentially in the years ahead. Every aspect of our lives will be touched by this and many of these changes will be disruptive to the existing order.

I have been told that the University must embrace change, and this is true. However the whole truth is that we must all embrace change. This maelstrom will engulf us all and how we deal with it will define our future.

These changes will impact on the social order as citizens become more connected, both to each other and the outside world. Gone are the days where we stood on the seashore and wondered what the world beyond was like. Today we know. We can see for ourselves without leaving our homes. This presents a major challenge! It creates a level of expectation among the youth that **MUST** be satisfied.

Our economies will be challenged by the coming changes. If my predecessor had proffered in his address that by the time he left office there would be electric self-driving cars, it would have been met with a polite smile. If I suggest now, that by the end of my term artificial intelligence will have rendered obsolete many of the professions that have existed since the time of the Romans that too would be dismissed.

We have two clear choices as I see it: We either join this new revolution, realign all of our institutions and processes to accept a state of constant change, use technology to bridge the divide that separates us from this world, and force ourselves into this new club whether it welcomes us or not. Our greatest challenge will be ourselves; to change our mind-set, to dream

big, to act big, to never conceive failure and most important – to allow the young among us to lead the way. I will not describe the other choice, as it is not worth considering. It involves failure, disorder and poverty!

Initially technology companies provided tools to improve productivity in the traditional economy. As processing power increased and the internet became all-pervasive, technology companies themselves began to provide services directly to the consumer. Today technology companies driven by big data are disrupting traditional industries and profoundly changing interpersonal communication, the retail industry, the hospitality industry, the transport industry, and so it goes.

This is just the beginning of the change. Technology will drive everything in the future and will displace traditional jobs, from structural engineering to brick-laying. Our challenge will be to navigate a path through this to avoid social chaos.

The University of the West Indies has a pivotal role to play in assuring that we prepare our young people to face this exciting and ever changing world, and to retrain those of us for whom it is never too late to learn.

The University does not have a moment to waste as change is upon us. The needs of our undergraduates are morphing as I speak. Importantly, the university needs to work collaboratively with the other institutions of learning, starting with the primary school systems to ensure that we receive more properly prepared matriculants, better able to benefit from a tertiary education.

The University now sees itself as an international institution with relationships on several continents. We must also see ourselves as an exporter of education. We have beautiful campuses, in exotic locations, where millions come to holiday.

We need to use this comparative advantage along with our high academic standards and the fact that we are English-speaking countries to attract more international fee-paying students to improve the university's finances and create further diversity.

Financing is and will always be a major challenge. A university education is an aspiration of every family and in our case the commitment of every state. It will never be inexpensive and requires sacrifice on the part of everyone. The University must continue to grow its commercial activities. There is much opportunity for partnerships with the private sector as well as with the contributing states, to improve the finances of the university. To do this we need to step out of our comfort zone. We must learn to monetize our assets and create value by involving our academics in designing the solutions for the future.

Nonetheless, we must never forget our core purpose - the education of our youth! We cannot just produce certified young people. We must produce energized citizens with a social conscience, motivated to change their world.

The University must encourage student activism, discourse on the issues of the day, and the freedom to develop their minds outside of the strict confines of their studies. In my humble opinion, social skills, empathy, social consciousness and a concern for equity are as equally important to success as is technical competence.

This Daaga Auditorium, named in memory of a rebellious slave, brings to mind a rebel of my time, Makandal Daaga, a man who chose to identify himself as the “Chief Servant” – a description that resonates deeply with me, as it captures what I believe good leadership to be.

So here I stand, my fellow West Indians, in these unfamiliar robes, chief servant of The University of the West Indies at the threshold of its 70th year, firm in the belief that we have the talent and resolve to meet the future with confidence!

I would like to thank the University again for providing me the opportunity to serve, as well as my family, my friends, my colleagues and the thousands of people who have touched my life and have made me what I am today.