

**Statement of the Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, on the occasion of the Royal Commonwealth Society's Gala Awards Dinner in London**

Dr. Danny Sriskandarajah, Director of The Royal Commonwealth Society,  
The Members of the Commonwealth Community in London,  
Specially Invited Guests,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Evening!

I am honoured and at the same time humbled by your kind gesture of inviting me to address this Royal Society of the Commonwealth Gala Awards Dinner. I thank you for the invitation.

I extend on behalf of the Government and People of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago as well as on my own behalf, sincere congratulations to the winners of the essay, photo and film competitions and extend my best wishes to the members of the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS).

I am sure that we are all delighted to be part of such a prestigious event hosted by the RCS. Founded in 1868 (I repeat 1868), that is 142 years ago, the RCS has come to be known as the oldest and largest civil society body devoted to Commonwealth affairs.

You have taken on the task of promoting understanding about common international issues.

The programmes and projects that you have initiated to achieve this goal is commendable. It does what the Commonwealth is intended to achieve which is to bring people and cultures together.

In particular, your focus upon youth and their role in shaping the society of the future is even more important.

In an age of youth cynicism and the proliferation of youth cultures that reflect a level of dissidence with mainstream society, it is important that an organization like yours with a rich tradition of enhancing social values be supported in its noble mission of integrating the voice of youth and their multifaceted talents in all aspects of development.

The progress of society depends on the active involvement of the people who will shape the future, who will create that future. Your society can embrace a unique opportunity of mentoring the youth who are in essence the future.

Throughout the world, there appears to be less concern with values based living, and yet those societies which we admire are the ones which have promoted human values.

It is the internalization and practice of human values which lead to rational decision choices and helps us to distinguish between right and wrong.

Only last week, in my own country, the Ministry of Education and UNESCO held a workshop aimed at teaching religion in schools. We recognize the importance of instilling values at a young age, and in addition the importance of children and adults appreciating the religious ideals, culture and traditions of each other.

In this way we celebrate and benefit from diversity, promote harmony through understanding, and mutual respect through knowledge and appreciation.

The Commonwealth with its multiplicity of traditions and cultures gives us a wonderful opportunity to speak to the world as to how to appreciate and in that promote peace.

Your Society can play an important role in this venture. Peace is going to be achieved only when peoples and nations grow to respect differences.

I am particularly enthused by the engagement of youth in debates. So much of the peace that the world lacks is due to the absence of conversations between people.

It is conversations that lead to conversion. The world needs new conversations. These conversations need to be focused on how to create peace in a world that so often stands on the brink of one form of holocaust or another; conversations that would inspire young people to achieve fulfilment through service activities.

The youth population between the ages of 14 and 24 years account for slightly over a billion of the total world population of 6.3 billion.

The share of the youth population is expected to grow from the current 17 % to 30% within two decades. About 85% of the one billion youth live in developing countries.

Of this 238 million survive on less than US\$ 1 per day.

With roughly half the Commonwealth's population aged under 24 years of age (closer to three-quarters in many of the developing member countries), youth issues in development are more relevant to the Commonwealth than to many others.

It is therefore imperative for the future that steps are taken to invest in the youth of today.

This investment must include projects geared towards harnessing the energy of youth and channelling them into healthy activities. We must grow the mind of our young people even as we provide jobs and other physical amenities.

Young people don't fail society. It is instead society by its marginalization of youths who fail the youth.

Things that I have done for children and the youth

In my own country, my government took two important decisions:

1. The establishment of a Children's Life Fund
2. Computers for all children entering secondary school for the first time. This year 20,300 lap top computers will be distributed at no cost to the students.

Financial deprivation should never be the cause of suffering of children. The less fortunate must have the same opportunities as the more fortunate.

I have advocated at a recent reception of the margins of the UNGA that we develop Community Youth Ambassadors.

This is an idea in which I believe you are strategically placed to help implement and I invite you to do so.

In the Caribbean, we value our youth and while we may not have the abundance of resources of more developed countries to support youth development we have shining examples of youth excellence, one such example is photographer Kimberly Sue, who won the gold medal in your under 18 photographic awards competition, to whom I warmly congratulate.

You would also recall the name Dwight York, here in Great Britain, who made his debut in football at age 19; Brian Lara who at 15 years old, played for the under 19 West Indies Cricket Team in the youth cricket tournament; Hasely Crawford who started with athletics at age 17 and went on to win the Olympic 100 metres in Montreal in 1976; Stephen Ames who at 16 years, smashed the Hoerman Cup golf course record and the late Giselle Salandy who made her professional boxing debut at age 13.

Smallness is no barrier to excellence. The Commonwealth is rich in talent. I am sure my country's examples can be matched in other countries of the Commonwealth.

We all have a responsibility, a civil society like yours; a country like mine and leaders everywhere to work together to create the best facilitative environment to ensure that human potential finds its ultimate expression in a gift of excellence to the world.

Towards this end we must be committed.

This would ensure the sustainability of the RCS. In this way we would also leave leadership legacies that are cast not in concrete edifices but in human excellence.

It is only because of the creativity of the human mind that the world has progressed. The computer is still controlled by the human mind and that mind is what we should always seek to develop.

The creativity which emanates from the human mind is what we need to nourish. That, ladies and gentlemen is our mission.

Thank you for your kind attention. May the work of the Royal Commonwealth Society continue to prosper.