

LANGUAGE, DIPLOMACY & THE CSME

By Liesl Harewood



"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." - Mahatma Gandhi

Haven't you ever wished that you could communicate by speaking every, or at least several, of the world's languages? Wait! I am not suggesting that you become an overnight

intellectual and spend every waking hour reciting the Chinese alphabet, after all, by now with the proliferation of technological advances it really should be as simple as downloading your chosen language from the Matrix to your brain. Don't tell me that was just another unrealistic Hollywood blockbuster with the chances of occurrence limited to non-existence? See, my friends become quite concerned when I say these things-something about me losing my grip on reality but just hear me out and by the end of this article you will be convinced that even in the geographic sphere of the CSME region, the adoption and daily usage of multiple languages will become not just a diplomatic advantage, but a necessity in future interregional and international negotiations.

Today the member states of the Caribbean Community are confronted with situations both regionally and internationally which threaten to frustrate the economic development and which calls for a special type of collective resolve to chart the way through a changing and turbulent world economy. The Caribbean region has recognised that it cannot be excluded from the global economic and trading system even though it is in a tremendously disadvantageous position compared to some of its dominant and strongest players. Several academics, but unfortunately neither politicians nor policy-makers, have begun to explore, identify and develop the initial format for

what is being termed a 'beyond CSME' agenda for the region. This would incorporate integration with the non-CSME Caribbean-that is Central and Latin America, and even the state of Florida, on matters that range from joint trade and investment policies to common negotiation positions vis-à-vis the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), and trade liberalization throughout the hemisphere by means of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

However, to be considered as a serious international actor, the member states of the CSME must be placed within the context of the wider hemispheric and global community. One of the most significant initiatives that needs to be implemented by the region is the universal recognition of foreign languages as the key to diminishing our Caribbean Sea borders. Don't we all speak English in the Caribbean anyways? I truly hope that you answered no to that since our intelligent CIRCUIT readers know what we have embraced Dutch-speaking Suriname and French-speaking Haiti as part of our Caribbean family. Furthermore let's not forget our Spanish-speaking neighbours, who although are not members of the CSME are just too physically close to ignore. After all South and Central America are closer to Barbados, yet the first place we head for holidays is the great North but that's another article.



Since the creation of the CSME is the most complex, the most ambitious and the most difficult enterprise ever contemplated by the Caribbean region, the importance of foreign languages in this political area has been unfortunately overlooked. Let's look beyond the standard European languages that are a staple of the Barbadian secondary school experience and consider for example the impact of patois and creole in the region. When in St. Lucia, less than 200 kilometres away from Barbados, I am always amazed and somewhat distressed at my lack of communication skills with my Caribbean neighbours. When the "Lucians" are excitedly talking amongst themselves, without being rude they switch to creole and I am forever an outsider banished to the Fringes, until they remember my presence-after a few persistent throat clearing coughs and pointed looks-and acknowledge my existence by grudgingly switching to the less exciting universal language of "standard" English.

Now I know English is the recognized language of business and the representatives of the CSME countries will be well versed to participate in negotiations in this tongue, but beyond the negotiation table what exactly is being done to embrace



the cultures of the various islands? This aspect of “soft” diplomacy—that is promoting and inculcating West Indian values abroad via cultural exchange and a concerted and sustained

program, is one of the ways in which the CSME can be used to boast of the diversity of culture of the various islands. By embracing the local tongue and opening our minds to the other languages and cultures we can not only learn about our neighbours, but also the rest of the world. For example, Guyana and Trinidad are blessed with such a vibrant Indian society—yet few young people know that Bollywood is not a typo, but rather the most active film industry in the world. By learning to tolerate and appreciate our richness of culture, we would not only learn about the West Indians of Indian descent, but simultaneously about India itself without having to pay BDS\$3500 to go to Bombay; a mere BDS\$12 at the local cinema could do part of the job of educating and increasing the cultural outlook. The knowledge is right at our back door but we seem content in choosing race, religion and other taboos to divide us.

What are you waiting for? Start translating this article in to a language of your choice—and pig latin does not count! Your aptitude for languages may just be the key to making the CSME work. ■



Caribbean student takes home World Public Speaking Champion 2006 title

There's a lot to talk about at the University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus since the title of World Public Speaking Champion 2006

was copped by one of its final year law students, O'Neil Simpson. The Jamaican, who is the outgoing International Affairs Committee Chairperson of the Guild of Students Council, competed at the World Universities and Colleges Debating Championships which were held in Dublin, Ireland. This was no small feat as the competition saw approximately 325 teams representing over 100 institutions from 53 countries. It was the first time that Cave Hill competed at the championships and Simpson proved that the Caribbean has students of the highest calibre as he competed against five other individuals from renowned institutions such as Australia's Macquarie University and America's Yale University on the topic “Beauty is an over-rated virtue”. It's a momentous occasion not only for O'Neil as an individual, but also for Caribbean students and the Caribbean educational system as a whole. CiRCUIT has a chat with O'Neil (have a dictionary handy).

How do you feel about winning the World Public Speaking Champion?

>> I continue to feel, as I felt then, quite elated. Generally, I loathe cliches, but I have to admit that I actually did experience

the ‘heart skipping a beat’ bit, and wondered if I was having a mild cardio-vascular episode. Seriously though, it was quite a stunning moment in and of itself, and it would be fair to say that the weight of the ‘accomplishment’ has been felt more in retrospect. When I heard the announcement, I thought, “good one, O'Neil; well done!” I was absolutely ecstatic... I credit God with praise for the accomplishment, as I am quite convinced that His help made it happen.

What were your favourite books as a child? Thesauri and dictionaries?

>> From quite a young age (here comes the story...., ugh!), I was always fascinated by books. I think it would be fair to say that I had exposure to them at quite an early stage. My Mom frequently regales me with tales about Dad reading to me while I was still in the womb...(let's NOT pursue that thought just now...). Anyway, childhood favourites would have included the classic fairy tales. I apparently had quite a knack for quoting, *in toto*, epics like “Rapunzel”, “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Little Pigs”; to the point of being able to correct any mistakes made by another reader when I was present (sad, eh?). Of course, this was copiously supplemented by renditions of Jamaican folktales, which made use of such characters as the Anansi spider/man figure (please note, not Spiderman!), the Riba Mumma mermaid of the rural waterways and the multiple apparitions of the night, like the jangling-chain Rollin' Calf. I'm afraid the thesauri and