



ADDRESS

By

The Honourable Maxie Cuffie, MP

Minister of Public Administration &

Communication

Broadband Caribbean Forum 2016

***“Broadband: Supporting Life in the 21st
Century”***

Hyatt Regency Hotel

July 14th, 2016

- Mr. Shola Taylor, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation
- The Honourable Gregory Bowen, Minister of Communications, Works, Physical Development, Public Utilities and ICT, representing Dr. the Right Honourable Keith C. Mitchell, Prime Minister of Grenada
- The Honourable Darcy Boyce, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister with responsibility for Energy, Telecommunications, Immigration and Invest, Barbados
- The Honourable Catherine Hughes, Minister of Public Telecommunications, Guyana
- Ms. Bernadette Lewis, Secretary General and Mr. Nigel Cassimire, Ag. Secretary General , Caribbean Telecommunications Union
- Mr. Cleveland Thomas, International Telecommunications Union Area Representative, Caribbean Office
- Permanent Secretary Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago Lydia Jacobs
- Mr. Philip Dalsou, Permanent Secretary, Government of St. Lucia and Chairman of the Executive Council of the Caribbean Telecommunications Union

- Deputy Permanent Secretaries, Ministry of Public Administration and Communications Ms. Denise Duncan and Mr Kurt Meyer
- Mr. Gilbert Peterson, Senior Counsel, Chairman of the Board, of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad & Tobago
- Members of the Board, Executive and Management, Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad & Tobago
- Mr. Kevin Connolly, Affordable Access Initiatives, Business Development, Microsoft, Diamond Sponsor of the Forum
- Industry partners and stakeholders
- Delegates
- Members of the media,
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

The pleasure is indeed mine this evening to share a few minutes with you, at the end of what I am told, has been a gruelling day's work. When I saw the list of participants scheduled to speak during today's proceedings and the vast array of topics to be deliberated upon, I wondered about the effectiveness of my own contribution this evening.

I was tempted to compare myself with the legendary Courtney Walsh going in to try and save the West Indies cricket team from collapse, with the stands groaning in ambivalence, wondering on the one hand, how long he will last, and on the other, whether he could really pull it off.

I give you the assurance though that I have neither the inclination to keep you guessing this evening as to how long I will speak, nor wondering what more could I add, that would be of value, to your packed agenda, already littered with subject matter specialists, infinitely more capable than myself, of offering pearls of wisdom on the theme “Broadband: Supporting Life in the 21st Century”.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the two minutes that I have just taken by way of preamble, a tweet about this event could have circulated around the world, a doctor in London could have advised on a diagnosis of a patient in South Africa, news of an approaching tsunami could have been sent from satellite images located millions of miles away, and a student who graduated in Trinidad could have uploaded a video of that event to her grandmother in India.

Such is the power of superfast broadband, such is the reach of internet connectivity, and such is the impact of superfast content streaming technology in the 21st century. But the reality, I have come to realize, is that many of us take this for granted.

Without even thinking about it, millions of us go online multiple times daily, to check e-mail, catch up on the news, or shop or stream our favorite shows while the kids research their homework assignments on the Web. Now imagine if that Internet connection was severed. Almost every aspect of our lives would be disrupted: how we keep in touch with friends and family; how we do our jobs; how we access news and entertainment; how we make informed financial decisions.

The harsh and unfortunate reality for a significant part of our populations though, whether in the Caribbean region, the wider Commonwealth, North and South America, is that they don't have to imagine life without an Internet connection; they live on the wrong side of the digital divide.

And the most prohibitive factor, preventing their access to this 21st century lifeline is cost. I am certain that during your earlier deliberations today, many statistics would have been provided to elucidate on this point.

But colleagues, we can recite statistics all we want. We must, however, never lose sight of the fact that what we're really talking about is people – unemployed workers who miss out on jobs that are only listed online, students who gather outside our National Library Building in downtown Port of Spain to use the Wi-Fi hotspots to do homework.

It's not available at home, our elderly who gather at the public library in Tobago to make contact with their children and other relatives abroad, because the cost to install the necessary infrastructure in their village is prohibitive.

There are very few who would argue with the notion, ladies and gentlemen, that Internet access has become a prerequisite for full participation in our 21st century economy and our knowledge-based society. The truth though, as inconvenient as it might be, is that millions of our people are still not benefitting from the opportunities made possible by the most powerful and pervasive platform in history.

Friends, Ministerial colleagues, local, regional and international representatives, we can do better. Indeed, we must do better.

We are not doing too badly as the recently released World Economic Forum's Technology Readiness Index revealed. Trinidad and Tobago crawled three places up in the rankings, earning plaudits for our infrastructure, our accessibility and our cost, but fell badly in terms of our usage, particularly by Government.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot escape the design of history that has placed a responsibility upon each and every one of us in this room, to create a better tomorrow for the millions who live in our regions.

We could either bite the bullet and accept the challenge, or pass the responsibility to the next generation.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has taken the decision to bite the bullet. Indeed as we wrestle with the implications of a significant reduction in our revenues from oil and gas, we are determined to lay the ground work to ensure that broadcasting and telecommunications become one of the next engines of growth in the local economy. In two weeks we will be launching our WiFi on buses programme, but this is only the beginning.

As part of a wider policy to increase exponentially the level of broadband access by citizens, this administration has committed to providing a free island-wide public broadband wireless network.

We are convinced that this singular policy will enhance meaningfully, the quality of life enjoyed by our citizens, opening up vistas of possibility for those with ambition and purpose, to realize dreams they once thought unreachable.

One of the knock-on effects of this policy, we believe, will be a reduction in internet rates. Ladies and gentlemen, there can be no disputing the fact that an island-wide broadband system will allow access to goods and services at reduced rates because the Internet ecosystem is based on competition.

Among other things, lack of affordable broadband makes it harder for poor citizens to spend their limited income more efficiently...because they can't access the competitive market.

A tried and proven free-market method of keeping broadband costs low and service high is to encourage competition between broadband providers.

In the same way the broadcast media was liberalized by my predecessors, to the point where there now exists in Trinidad and Tobago more than 35 radio stations, approximately seven (7) television stations and a plethora of daily and weekly newspapers, so too the liberalization of the internet and broadband industry will radically alter the country's technology landscape.

The coming on stream of Government's In-Tech Park at Tamana, and its development as the go-to place for the development of internet technology and infrastructure will certainly give life to one of the many visionary decisions of the late former Prime Minister, Patrick Manning.

The potential for job creation, particularly amongst the thousands of our young people who are benefitting from the Government's GATE programme, is staggering, and could see this country rival any other, in terms of our IT development.

Such a life altering move will, as a matter of course, necessitate a thorough review of the local infrastructure and the regulations to ensure that standards, proper to the industry are devised, implemented and monitored by the relevant regulatory bodies.

And it into this arena that bodies such as those represented here this evening, regional and international, can readily find a place.

I believe there is sufficient goodwill in this gathering to ensure that across our regions, there is harmonization of the various pieces of applicable legislation and the elimination of outdated or unnecessary regulations, so as to reduce administrative burdens and make it easier for broadband providers to participate.

Such an initiative will undoubtedly provide them with a good business case for participation, and in turn, provide consumers across the region with more competitive options.

By increasing competition and bringing market forces to bear on the industry, we will get at the heart of the historic issues that have undermined the ability of low income consumers to have access to services comparable to what the rest of us are fortunate to enjoy.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no need to reinvent the proverbial wheel. If we agree, that we are all on the same path to ensuring that broadband access is critical to supporting life in the 21st century, then I am certain we can find the synergies amongst ourselves that would assist our governments in moving this from a Conference theme to a budgeted item.

Your conference therefore, is as timely as it is relevant, because it is important for the Caribbean at this time to consider the advantages of increased broadband for all its citizens.

This conference presents us with an invaluable opportunity to learn from those who have already embraced broadband in their countries so that we can implement what worked as we see “Broadband Supporting Life in the 21st century”.

There is no reason why villages in Dominica cannot be connected with Denmark, why households in Bridgetown cannot be connected to Bahrain, and my constituents in La Horquetta/Talparo cannot interface, at the click of a button, with residents in London or Taiwan. What it requires is the collective will of this gathering.

It was the third test of the 1998-1999 series between Australia and the West Indies being played in Barbados. West Indies were batting 302 for 9, chasing 311 for victory.

Brian Lara was at the crease on 140, and in walked Courtney Walsh, with an embarrassing test record of 43 ducks during his career.

Australia was scenting victory. In the 10 minutes I've spoken to you this evening, Walsh played one of his best innings, and allowed Brian Lara to bring home the victory and draw the series. I hope I have done you a similar justice this evening.

Thank you, and may God bless your gathering here this evening, and the rest of your conference.