**Speech by Sir Ronald Sanders**

**on 31st May 2014**

**To mark the 48th Anniversary of the Independence of Guyana**

**and the 75th Birthday of Joseph ‘Reds’ Perreira**

**at an event organised by the Honorary Consul of Guyana in St Lucia**

**at the Sandals Resort**

I begin by thanking Lokesh Singh, the Honorary Consul for Guyana in St Lucia, and the organisers of this event, for inviting me to be the guest speaker here this evening.

It is a privilege to address such a distinguished and accomplished audience and to recognise amongst you many friends with whom I have shared a Caribbean life and a regional commitment.

You will understand if, in that process, I identify especially a great St Lucian and Caribbean man whose life-work in academia, in research and writing, in diplomacy, and in the cause of the region’s development, has been an exemplary model to his peers and an inspiration to a generation of West Indian people – Dr Vaughan Lewis.

It is a great pleasure to see him here.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are gathered to mark two occasions – each of them special in their own way – the 75th birthday of Joseph ‘Reds’ Perreira and the 48th anniversary of the Independence of Guyana.

Let me start with Reds.

For all the advances in medicine, there is still no cure for the common birthday.

So here we are celebrating - as former US President Ronald Reagan said at a similar event – the 36th anniversary of Reds 39th birthday.

But, Reds, if at 75, there is any doubt about your capacity to rise to occasions, keep in mind that Playboy’s Hugh Hefner is 88.

And, you are fortunate:

Old is when you and your teeth no longer sleep together.

Psalms 90.10 of the Christian Bible promised that “the days of our years are three score years and ten”.

By that reckoning, the good Lord has already smiled on Reds by an additional five years.

He is already the envy of some people I know because he still has a full head of hair.

Reds wasted none of the three score years and ten as all gathered here can attest.

And, he has defied the challenges of age and its afflictions by continuing to work unselfishly for another five years in the cause of the development of sport and sports persons particularly here in St Lucia but also in the wider Caribbean.

He gives a unique truth to Abraham Lincoln’s observation that: “In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."

I have no need to recount here the remarkable life that Reds has lived.

It has been vividly narrated in his biography, “Living my Dreams”, published four years ago.

It is a story of a man, born in humble circumstances, who overcame many odds, turning adversity to opportunity, and dreams to reality, to reach the pinnacles of sports commentary globally and sports administration and promotion regionally.

In the course of that life, he touched the lives of many others, helping to realize their dreams, attain their goals, and fulfill their ambitions.

Reds came to St Lucia in 1984 to take up the post of Sports Coordinator at the Secretariat of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States.

He had already played major roles in the development and promotion of sport in his native Guyana, and he had an outstanding reputation as a sports Commentator and sports advisor in the region as a whole.

But, it would be misleading to convey the impression that his appointment was welcomed by all.

The bogey-man of Caribbean relations was reflected by those who felt that the post should go to someone from the Eastern Caribbean, and not a Guyanese.

That hatchet of ‘otherness’ - so often wielded in protection of narrow insularity in our region – was deployed in resistance to Reds’ engagement.

It took men with a wider vision to overturn that resistance – men who are conscious that the countries of our region are too small to produce all the talent that each of them needs, and men with the courage to recognize the wisdom of Jamaica’s Poet, Louise Bennett, that ‘Han stronger than finger’ and ‘One finger kyan catch fly’.

Among those men was Dr Vaughan Lewis, then Director-General of the OECS, who spoke up for Reds’ appointment and was later to record of Reds’ contribution: “He left a definitive mark on the OECS as one of the original core of employees responsible for starting-up the various activities for which we had responsibility, and for that I, and many others, have remained very grateful’.

Ladies and Gentlemen, while it is impossible to capture fully, and with all its flavour, Reds’ remarkable 75 years, it may be best summed-up in the words of West Indian Poet and Writer, Ian McDonald:

“I have never known anyone who loves all sport more than Reds; who believes more strongly that its encouragement and assistance is an essential part of nation building. And, I have never known anyone who has given more of himself whole-heartedly to the appreciation of West Indies sport and the greatness of all games”.

That is the Caribbean man we are all privileged to salute tonight on his 75th Birthday - I give you, Joseph ‘Reds’ Perreira.

I turn now to the second event we mark tonight – the 48th anniversary of the Independence of Guyana.

There are few who would contend that in its domestic context – political, economic and social – Guyana’s 48 years of independence have been untroubled.

The promise that Independence heralded, and the hopes and aspirations of the Guyanese people for an economically prosperous nation that would bind up the wounds of its racial division and create a society based on equity, are yet to be fully met.

In the late 1970s, more than a decade after the race riots of 1962-1963 that scarred the nation, I was visiting Barbados in attendance at a Conference.

I, and others, frequented a rare thing in Barbados in those days – a Chinese Restaurant that I learned was owned by a Guyanese of Chinese origin named Hing.

Mr Hing, I said, I hear you’re from Guyana. How long have you been here?

“Since the riots”, he responded.

“So when are you going back?”, I asked

“When the riots done” – was his reply.

It is a telling commentary that the real riots of 1962-63 continued to exist metaphorically but meaningfully in the minds of many Guyanese who opted to leave.

Today, over 80 per cent of Guyana’s tertiary educated people and many other of its creatively-talented people live abroad; amongst them many of you in this room.

Indeed, according to the most recent measurement available Guyana leads every other country in the world in terms of its tertiary educated people who live abroad.

The figure stands at 89 per cent.

But, while the figure is high, Guyana is not unique.

Grenada is second in the world for the number of its tertiary educated people who live abroad at 85.1 per cent; Jamaica is third at 85 per cent.

And, as a matter of interest, St Lucia ranks 10th in the world with 71.1 percent of its tertiary educated people living abroad.

Of further interest, while you might believe that Guyana would also be number one of the top total emigration countries in the world, it is not. It is 5th with 56.8 per cent of its population having emigrated as measured in 2010.

Two Caribbean countries had higher emigration than Guyana. They are Grenada ranked at number 3 with 65.5 per cent of its population emigrated; and St Vincent and the Grenadines ranked at number 4 with 61 per cent of its population emigrated.

St Lucia was 22nd in the world with 23.2 per cent of its people having emigrated.

These figures are all very worrying for our Caribbean region as a whole.

That we are unable to keep our tertiary educated and skilled and talented people at home impacts our capacity for development in many ways – in entrepreneurship, in technological innovation, in the provision of services such as medical care and education, in financial services and in government particularly in economic negotiations including trade and finance.

It is often pointed out that Jamaica and Guyana are recipients of high remittances from their Diaspora particularly those in the US, Canada and the United Kingdom. In Jamaica’s case in 2012, remittances totaled US$2 billion and were number one in the Caribbean, just ahead of Haiti. Guyana was number three in the region with remittances of U$405 million contributing 20 per cent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product.

But, in reality, the remittances – while important as a social welfare measure for the families who are the recipients and for the contribution to the domestic economy where the recipients spend on goods and services – the flip side is the loss of enormous talent and skills over many years, the cost of which to the economy and the country outweighs the benefits of the remittances.

In Guyana’s case, one can only imagine the heights to which the country might have climbed over the last 48 years had it been able to retain that large body of tertiary educated and other skilled people within its boundaries.

And, had Guyana climbed up the economic ladder based on the quality of its people and its very considerable natural resources, it would have carried with it, its neighbours and partners in the Caribbean Community – becoming not only a huge market for their goods and services, but also a provider of jobs in many areas; a provider of land to Caribbean nationals for agricultural production and export; and it could have shared with countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago, the financial underpinnings that are needed to support a vibrant Caribbean Single Market and Economy.

We need only look at Guyana’s economic performance over the last six years to recognize immediately that its natural resources place the country in an enviable position to be an economic powerhouse.

Growth of the economy averaged 4.5 per cent between 2008 and 2012, jumping to a remarkable 5.2 per cent in 2013 and a projection of further growth of 5.6 per cent this year driven largely by increased production and export of gold and rice.

This growth is all the more remarkable because the majority of CARICOM countries have experienced anemic or no growth over the same period.

Indeed, the 2014 national Budget of US$1 billion is the largest in Guyana’s history designed to invest capital, in the medium-term, in energy, transportation, communication infrastructure and structural diversification.

But, despite its recent admirable economic performance, it remains a wounded society at the level of its politics.

So much so, that its economic performance could now be adversely affected by the failure of Parliament to adopt Legislation designed to prevent money laundering and terrorism financing in accordance with rules drawn-up by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force, a sister outfit of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – the association of the world’s most powerful nations.

The political parties have found it impossible to agree arrangements that would allow the legislation – already in place in all CARICOM countries - to be adopted.

The consequence is that Guyana will be blacklisted internationally and all of its financial transactions scrutinized and delayed even if its financial institutions are able to maintain a necessary network of correspondent banking relations throughout the world.

In this age-old stand-off - even in the face of severe consequences - we are reminded of the insightful words of Guyana’s Poet, Martin Carter:

“Only when our footprints end

Can tell whether a journey

Was an old advance

Or a new retreat;

Or whether in the dust

Our heel marks and our toe marks are confused”.

On the occasion of its 48th anniversary of Independence, therefore, while Guyana remains encumbered by politics of division that have stunted its development in the past, and now adorns its raiment not with pearls but with tears, it is still a country of rich natural resources with all the potential and opportunity for the kind of economic growth that can make it an economic powerhouse for its own benefit and the benefit of CARICOM as a whole.

But all is not lost.

There is today in Guyana an energy in its open political debate; in the freedom expressed in its media; in the demands in parliament for accountability.

Perhaps this welcome energy is part of an evolutionary process that might yet lead to bridging political divides by structured forms of governance that will leave the old ways behind.

Perhaps we might yet see not the heelmarks of the old retreat, but the toe marks of a new beginning.

On the Caribbean front, it is worth noting that from 1965 when Forbes Burnham signed with Bird of Antigua and Barrow of Barbados the agreement to establish a Caribbean Free Trade Area, Guyana has been unhesitatingly committed to the regional integration project.

Guyanese governments of every political stripe have been in the forefront of fulfilling the nation’s obligations under the CARICOM Treaty even when others have lagged behind.

Just recently in March this year, despite their differences over domestic matters, the parties in the Guyana Parliament unanimously agreed an amendment to the Caribbean Community Free Entry of Skilled Nationals Act to allow for the spouse of a skilled national to work. No other CARICOM country has yet done so.

Whatever political differences obtain domestically, the political parties of Guyana have shown remarkable oneness in their commitment to Caribbean integration and development.

The relationship between Guyana and St Lucia has been especially close.

There was a time when hundreds of St Lucians migrated to Guyana to farm and French patois was an attractive addition to the accents of Guyana’s market places.

Today, I understand that some of the descendants of those early migrants have brought a peculiar Guyanese twang to the miscellany of brogues heard in the streets of Castries and elsewhere in St Lucia.

They – like many in this room – are reflections of our Caribbean aspiration to live in one Caribbean space, to be part of one Caribbean identity, to speak with different accents but in the language of a shared civilization.

Other Guyanese – not born of St Lucian parents – also now live in St Lucia; many of you in this room.

Yes, you carry a mixed nostalgia about Guyana, and yes you wish the best for it.

But, you also carry a devotion to this land to which you have moved, in which you have settled, and to which you make a contribution as proud adopted St Lucians.

There is no contradiction in the two.

It is, if anything, an assertion of your Caribbean identity that embraces the region as a whole and celebrates the right of belonging which every Caribbean person should enjoy.

Maya Angelou – that wonderful Universal Poet – who left us only this week, summed it all up in one verse:

*When we come to it*

*We, the people, of this wayward floating body*

*Created on this earth, of this earth*

*Have the power to fashion for this earth*

*A climate where every man and every woman*

*Can live freely without sanctimonious piety*

*(and) Without crippling fear.*

So, as Guyana marks its 48th anniversary of Independence at a period of unprecedented economic growth, displaying all its capacity to realise its full potential, I call on you all to congratulate it and to urge it on to prosperity with equity and parity for all its people.

Thank you.