The Sir Shridath Ramphal Memorial Lecture

Distinguished Lecture for the Organization of Commonwealth Caribbean Bar Associations (OCCBA)

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Has the Rule of Law Been Replaced by 'Might is Right'?

Defending Sovereignty and Promoting Peace in the Caribbean

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I. Introduction

Distinguished Members of the Organization of Commonwealth Caribbean Bar Associations and Friends

It is with some hesitation, and not a little humility, that I deliver a lecture on international law and sovereignty before so distinguished an audience.

I am a practitioner of diplomacy who for more than four decades has had to wrestle with realities that often mock the aspirations of law.

I dare to address you only because your President and past President invited me on the strength of my experience in many international theaters, contending for the rights of small states, and because this lecture is given in honour of a man who lived at the intersection of law and diplomacy—Sir Shridath "Sonny" Ramphal—my mentor for half a century.

Sir Shridath was a central architect of Caribbean integration and a committed advocate of international law.

Born in British Guiana in 1928 and trained at King's College London and Gray's Inn, he began in service to West Indian unity, first drafting the Constitution of the defunct Federation of the West Indies, and then the 1965 CARIFTA Agreement at Dickenson Bay in Antigua - the seed from which the Treaty of Chaguaramas and CARICOM grew.

As Attorney General, Foreign Minister, and later the Commonwealth's longest-serving Secretary-General, he upheld law as both sword and shield against oppression - a shield for the powerless.

Under his leadership, the Commonwealth became a force for moral action: confronting apartheid and racism; mobilizing support for Zimbabwe's independence, ending the rule of the White Minority regime of Ian Smith on the basis on 'One man-One Vote"; and establishing the first Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group which helped bring about Nelson Mandela's release and the end to Apartheid in South Africa.

Mandela would later say of him: "He is one of those men who chose the entire world as their theatre in the fight for human justice."

For Ramphal, sovereignty was never the unfettered exercise of national power; it was interdependence under law – the conviction that humanity's safety depends on international law to restrain power, resolve disputes, and define justice beyond borders.

He helped advance the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, entrenching the oceans as the "common heritage of mankind."

Within the Caribbean, he championed the Caribbean Court of Justice as both guardian of the Revised CARICOM Treaty and symbol of regional maturity, insisting in his own unique style:

> "Now that we have created our Caribbean Court of Justice in a manner that has won the respect and admiration of the common law world, it is an act of abysmal contrariety that we have withheld so substantially its appellate jurisdiction in favour of that of the Privy Council".

His faith was simple but audacious: that international law is civilization's conscience, the only universal language in which the strong and the small can speak as equals.

His career was proof that law, rightly used, is the measure of moral power.

In honouring his legacy, we affirm that for the powerful, sovereignty may be a sword—but for small states, it must remain a shield forged in the discipline of law.

II. The Arguments of this presentation

I now set out the arguments I intend to make and the conclusions I wish to suggest.

First, that while sovereignty in the modern order is both a right and a capacity: every state holds the right, but not all possess the capacity to exercise it freely.

Second, the international system - while proclaiming sovereign equality -has long managed power rather than equalized it; and today the powerful are stripping away the pretense that once sugar-coated the ugly truth – nominal sovereignty, yes… the capacity to exercise that right, no.

Third, for small states, especially in the Caribbean, the defense of sovereignty rests not on force but on law; not on bravado but on collective action.

And fourth, that, in this scenario, Caribbean states must move from individually wringing their hands to collectively holding their hands.

They must create a concrete agenda by which the region can widen the space within which, using international law, they could restrain the imposed might of the powerful.

III. The Caribbean Condition: Autonomy within Constraint

From the birth of our nations in the Commonwealth Caribbean, we understood that sovereignty for small states is conditional; bounded by economic dependence, geography, and the will of the powerful.

We invested not in armies and navies, but in principles as set out in the Charters of the United Nations and the Organization of American States, the International Convention of the Law of the Sea, the jurisprudence of human rights.

In other words, we placed our faith in the proposition that international rules could restrain the strong and protect the weak, and that the five veto member states of the UN Security Council would exercise their privilege as a trust, not as a weapon.

Yet, in practice, the veto has become a license for paralysis and impunity.

When respect for principles and fulfilment of the obligations of the UN Charter are most needed, they are suspended by the very states that wrote them.

The Council that was designed to defend the weak has too often become the instrument through which the strong escape restraint.

For small states, this failure is not academic.

The survival of small states depends on keeping faith with the UN Charter and international law, however much both may be ignored, from time to time, by the powerful.

If the guardians of the Charter will not uphold that balance, then it falls to those of us who still believe in the rule of law to defend it – not sometimes, but all the time; not for short term political gain, but for sustainable protection.

Here is a stark reality that we all know to be true:

In law, all states are equal; in practice, they are not.

Sovereignty is both a right and a capacity.

The right is universal; the capacity is unequal.

Capacity is constrained by scale, by exposure to climate and financial shocks, by the lack of adequate capital and technology.

The result is that legal sovereignty -the formal right to act autonomously - belongs to all; while political sovereignty - the power to act without permission - belongs to the few.

But the small and weak cannot accept the diminution of law in the face of might, for law is their recourse and their ultimate shield.

IV. From Melos to the Modern World

In 416 BCE, when the Athenians demanded the submission of the small island of Melos, the Melians pleaded for justice, for neutrality, for the right to exist.

But Athens, confident in its strength, replied coldly:

“The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must".

In those few words, Thucydides, an Athenian General and Historian, - in what he called ‘The Melian Dialogue” - captured in dramatic form a truth that still haunts the world: that power, unless restrained by law and conscience, will always find a justification for domination.

After two millennia of conquest and empire, humanity’s conscience rebelled.

Out of the ashes of two world wars came the United Nations, the rule of international law, and the moral conviction that even the smallest state possesses an equal sovereignty.

That was the promise of San Francisco, of the UN Charter, and later of the Commonwealth - a family of nations that Sir Shridath helped shape into a moral community, not a hierarchy of might.

Sir Shridath believed—and often declared—that law was civilization's answer to Melos.

In the Law of the Sea negotiations, he fought to make the oceans the "common heritage of mankind," where no powerful state could claim dominion.

In the campaign for a New International Economic Order, he argued that economic justice must replace economic coercion.

And through the Commonwealth and international commissions on which he served, concerned with development, disarmament, environment, security issues and global governance, he showed that small nations could be the moral compass of the world.

V. The Caribbean Voice in a Post-Melian World

For us in the Caribbean, the Melian Dialogue ought not to be a relic of Greek history; it should be an episode we should avow never to allow to befall ourselves or any other powerless state.

Small, open, and vulnerable economies live each day at the crossroads of power and principle.

When the great systems of finance, trade, and climate action ignore our realities, the voice of Melos echoes again — the plea of the weak to be heard amid the drumbeats of the strong.

Our demand for climate justice is the sharpest expression of this post-Melian struggle.

We have contributed least to the climate crisis, yet we suffer most from its fury. Rising seas, more frequent and ferocious hurricanes, and drought are no longer merely acts of nature; they are failures of justice.

To call for fair financing, loss and damage, and equitable access to adaptation resources is not to beg.

It is to insist — insist on law, on justice and on moral duty, and on the survival of nations that did not cause this harm.

And when small states act with resolve — law answers.

Confronted with the reality that the UN Conference of the Parties (COP) process was falling short, and that voluntary pledges by major emitters would not keep global warming to 1.5° Celsius, small states acted.

In 2022, the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law — founded by Antigua and Barbuda and Tuvalu — brought the matter before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

On May 21st, 2024, that Tribunal declared greenhouse-gas emissions to be "pollution of the marine environment" under the Law of the Sea Convention, and ruled that every State has a duty to prevent, reduce, and control such harm — through national regulation, the best available science, and heightened action from the wealthiest emitters.

That decision opened the way for another small-state initiative — Vanuatu's request that the United Nations General Assembly seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice.

On 23 July 2025, the Court answered: States have a duty to prevent significant climate harm, to protect human rights endangered by climate impacts, and breaches of those duties are internationally wrongful acts.

That same year, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights — responding to Chile and Colombia — sang in harmony with the ICJ.

It declared that the right to a healthy environment includes the right to a stable climate — without which life, health, water, and self-determination all wither.

The Court held that States owe cross-border duties of prevention; that due diligence is not a box to tick but a standard measured by foreseeable, irreversible harm; and that law binds not only governments but the private power of corporations whose emissions drive this crisis.

And it went further: justice requires remedy. States must guarantee access to information, participation, and justice; must assess impacts before approving projects that heat the planet; and must protect those most at risk — Indigenous peoples, children, and coastal communities already living with the sea at their door.

Together, the rulings of ITLOS, the ICJ – both of which benefitted from the unanimity of the Judges - and the Inter-American Court affirm that survival is not a plea for sympathy but a claim of right.

They widen the legal path for loss-and-damage and adaptation finance, and they remind the mighty that sovereignty without stewardship is a contradiction.

Law is at last catching up with physics — and in that convergence, the powerless find a haven that encourages them to face the turbulent weather of our times.

Yet we must be clear: these are still advisory opinions — not binding law.

Small states have won the argument, but now must confront entrenched power to give it life in the courts.

But whether all small states and other developing nations will join in that collective test of justice remains to be seen.

VI. Bitter lessons from lack of solidarity

The Caribbean knows, better than most, how power shapes the boundaries of our autonomy.

When the OECD began its "harmful tax competition" campaign in 1998, standards drafted by and for the interests of large economies were projected outward as universal obligations.

Public blacklists attacked reputations; de-risking severed correspondent banking lines; the threat of financial isolation compelled compliance even when there was no proportionate evidence of wrongdoing.

The European Union's "list of non-cooperative jurisdictions," launched in 2016 and repeatedly revised, extended the same dynamic.

The effect was not technical; it was imposition on sovereignty and its lack of equality in the exercise of it.

Decisions about our financial architecture were no longer made primarily in Bridgetown, Nassau, St. John's or Castries, but in Paris and Brussels.

The method has changed from that of empire, but the logic feels familiar.

Ratings agencies, sanctions committees, and multilateral lenders now exert power once wielded by colonial administrators.

I do not say this to deny the importance of standards, or of the fight against illicit finance; I say it to name a condition: conditional sovereignty.

Independence is respected only so long as we conform to standards set elsewhere, by actors who bear little of our risk and none of our accountability.

There is, too, a military dimension, though we have wisely refused to build our identity around arms.

We have no navies worthy of the name, no air forces, no battleships.

We rely on law, on norms, and on alliances to keep our seas a commons of peace.

That reliance was never naïve; it was pragmatic. If the law fails, we have no fallback to force.

CARICOM unity was intended to be the instrument by which we might widen our margin of autonomy.

It has achieved much—most of all the moral habit of consultation—but it has not yet become the multiplier of power that our founders imagined.

We have forgotten the question posed to all Commonwealth Caribbean counties, more than 70 years ago now, by Jamaica's Norman Manley – the grand advocate of a West Indian nation.

He asked: "Are we satisfied to be obscure and small nonentities in a world in which only larger groupings have the chance of success and survival, or will we opt for a West Indian nation standing shoulder to shoulder with all nations of the world?"

Too often, short-term alignments with external interests have set member states at cross-purposes with each other; too often, we have allowed suspicion to erode solidarity.

Yet we abandon integration at our peril.

Even united, we will not match the material reach of the mighty; but united, we can at least insist that law be the common language in which power must speak to us.

VII. The Unmasking of Power

From the Treaty of Westphalia to the Charter of the United Nations, the international system has proclaimed the sovereign equality of states.

In practice, it has always been more aspiration than achievement.

The political scientist Stephen Krasner named the paradigm "organized hypocrisy": great powers praise sovereignty in principle and violate it when convenient.

The jurist Antony Anghie traced the very concept of sovereignty to an imperial origin: Europeans designated the "civilized" as sovereign and assigned others to tutelage.

The categories changed their language, but not their function.

What, then, is new at this time when multilateralism and international cooperation are being abandoned for unilateralism.

The hierarchy is still the same; it is only but the bluntness which has become prominent.

The restraint that once obliged power to dress itself in the robes of law, the persuasion, the choreography of multilateralism, the respect paid to courts even when losing—have all diminished.

Treaties are treated as conveniences; rulings of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice are ignored.

The pretense of constraint is abandoned.

However, this is new only in its bluntness, not in the purposes that have always defined them,

From the time of their independence, the pleas of small states for special and differential treatment fell on ears grown deaf to development.

In climate diplomacy, hard-won commitments to loss-and-damage funds were honoured in unfilled promises not in compensation.

Now some powerful countries simply choose not to attend international meetings, even to discuss the terms.

All of this points to an urgency for more – not less – integration in the Commonwealth Caribbean; for advocacy of more not less multilateralism, and more not less respect for international law and the upholding of it.

VIII. Has 'Might is Right' Returned?

Therefore, the question before us tonight - Has the Rule of Law been replaced by "Might is Right"? - is more than rhetorical.

There is now what two Law Professors at Yale University – Hathaway and Shapiro - have described as "a cohesive assault on a long-standing principle of international law: that states are prohibited from threatening or using military force against other states to resolve disputes."

The Professors have argued that this assault has been most obvious in Russia's war against Ukraine, but evident, too, in threats by the US administration to use military force to "seize Greenland and the Panama Canal."

Within our region, the recent U.S. military build-up directed at Venezuela and Venezuela's own military threats and actions against Guyana, are arguably violations of the U.N. Charter which prohibits the "threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state."

In too many theatres of conflict, the principles of the UN Charter have been set aside for expediency.

Territorial integrity is violated; humanitarian law is mocked; international institutions are bypassed.

The multilateral order, once humanity's shield, trembles under the weight of unilateralism and indifference.

All this confirms the conclusion of political commentator and Author, Fareed Zakaria. that "the system that preserved relative peace and prosperity for eight decades is not self-sustaining; it must be vigorously defended."

And defended most of all by the small states of the Caribbean which have much to lose from its erosion.

IX. Might in Our Waters

Since early September, the United States has used lethal force against small boats it alleges carried drug traffickers, with more than eighty persons reported killed - the majority in international waters shared by Caribbean states.

Across the region and in Washington, many suspect the show of force is aimed less at interdiction than at intimidating—or even precipitating the overthrow of—Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro.

Christopher Sabatini, Senior Fellow for Latin America at Chatham House, noted in *The New York Times* on 1 October that Venezuela accounts for very little of the cocaine entering the United States and almost none of the fentanyl trade—facts that, at minimum, complicate the scale of the response.

His conclusion was straightforward: this looks less like counter-narcotics cooperation and more like a return to gunboat diplomacy.

On 31 October, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk stated that these strikes "violate international human rights law" and called for them to stop.

His office underscored the legal baseline: outside armed conflict, intentional lethal force is lawful only as a last resort to confront an imminent threat to life; even

within conflict, distinction, necessity, and proportionality must govern—standards the publicly available facts do not appear to satisfy.

Days later, reporting indicated that the U.S. administration briefed Congress that current legal opinions do not cover strikes on land targets inside Venezuela, and that new legal authority was being prepared.

Frank Mora, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense and Permanent Representative to the OAS, warns that this shift "from posture to purpose" risks unravelling decades of consent-based security cooperation.

And it bears recalling that under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as authoritatively interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee and reflected in the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force, a state may not deliberately take life outside active hostilities except to avert an imminent threat to life.

If operations in waters shared by Caribbean states are to be justified, they must be justified in law—openly, and with regional consultation—not asserted first and retrofitted with opinions later.

None of this denies the harm narcotics do.

It insists that cooperation be anchored in the UN Charter's rules on the use of force (self-defence or Security Council authorisation), the OAS Charter's non-intervention norm, UNCLOS provisions on interdiction and hot pursuit, and the strict limits that international human rights law places on lethal force.

The doctrine is simple: enforcing criminal law at sea or on land is not war.

No Commonwealth Caribbean country should abandon that principle for political convenience, however tempting the short-term gain.

X. The CARICOM Contradiction

Yet, the U.S. action exposed contradictions and conundrums that, for sixty-three years, have shadowed CARICOM's efforts at unified positions.

The first is the description of CARICOM as a "Community of Sovereign States".

In reality, governments have often been more concerned with guarding individual sovereignty than projecting collective community.

In the realm of "low" politics—support for a Caribbean candidate, for example—member states have usually pooled sovereignty.

But in “high” politics—relations with powerful states, especially the United States—there has been a marked unwillingness to harmonise positions.

In high politics, individual sovereignty comes to the fore, as each country seeks advantage for itself.

Thus, in mid-October, Heads of Government issued a communiqué reaffirming what CARICOM as an institution has long held sacred: that the Caribbean must remain a Zone of Peace; that disputes are to be resolved by dialogue and not by force; and that every state’s sovereignty and territorial integrity must be preserved within the bounds of international law.

The Trinidad and Tobago government reserved its position, and soon renounced the stated position attributed to all the other CARICOM governments.

Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar announced a foreign-policy realignment and questioned CARICOM’s reliability, justifying support for U.S. military deployments as a matter of national survival.

Racked by violent crime, narcotics trafficking, and gang warfare, she argued that other Caribbean nations enjoyed the luxury of distance while her country bore the brunt of regional lawlessness.

The remark reverberated across the region, especially in Caracas.

Venezuela accused Trinidad and Tobago of collusion with Washington and threatened to suspend bilateral energy agreements.

It then went further.

On 15 September 2025, Venezuela’s Defence Minister, Vladimir Padrino López, warned that his country would respond “in legitimate defence” to any attack launched from the territories of Guyana or Trinidad and Tobago, which he accused of acting “on instructions from Washington.”

Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez sharpened the warning: “Do not dare. Do not even think about it.”

Meanwhile, Guyana—locked in a 63-year-old claim by Venezuela for its Essequibo region -announced that it regarded the U.S. presence as a deterrent to Venezuelan aggression.

Here, then, is the CARICOM contradiction laid bare.

Trinidad and Tobago supports U.S. operations on grounds of domestic security; Guyana supports them on grounds of external threat; a few are silent and others call for respect for law, dialogue, and demilitarisation.

The result is neither collective security nor collective sovereignty, but fragmentation.

The Zone of Peace becomes a zone of interpretation.

This is the moment Sir Shridath Ramphal foresaw when he warned that "small states cannot endure as fragments; they can only endure as part of something larger."

He taught that law must be both shield and discipline—shield against domination, discipline against fear.

Today, the greatest peril CARICOM faces is incoherence from within.

When the small divide, the strong decide.

If the Caribbean cannot speak with one voice in defence of law, others will speak for us in the language of force.

That is how sovereignty dies – in acquiescence to power, and weakness from division.

XI. The CARICOM Challenge—Strengthening Community to Bolster Sovereignty

The greatest challenge to CARICOM countries is to strengthen "community" in order to bolster "sovereignty."

While powerful states—and groups of states—have at times divided and ruled Caribbean countries, too many of the individual decisions of CARICOM states have been shaped by self-censorship: in other words, by anticipating what a powerful partner expects and acting accordingly, even if that means breaking ranks with the CARICOM collective.

A "more powerful country" does not only mean a superpower; it includes any state on which individual CARICOM countries have developed critical dependencies.

In such conditions, sovereignty—the ability to act without coercion, or the anticipation of it—will continue to elude the Caribbean so long as each member state insists on unilateral prerogatives in matters of high politics.

The remedy is not conformity of opinion, but constancy of process: debate within the family, decide in council, and speak with one voice abroad.

Sir Shridath Ramphal spent his life proving that law could be both shield and sword, but never a mask for coercion.

In Southern Africa, he led the Commonwealth in sanctioning apartheid when many still called it "engagement."

He understood that law without teeth is theatre; so, he sharpened the teeth—multilateral, proportionate, and moral.

He championed the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which gave even the smallest island state jurisdiction over living and mineral resources, a say in the governance of the deep seabed, and a legal perimeter within which to steward creation.

He pioneered the Commonwealth's closed-door heads-of-government retreats—spaces in which power could be persuaded by reason, where tempers cooled and decisions ripened.

He convened expert panels to arm leaders with usable knowledge on debt, on the environment, on young people.

Ramphal's ethic was simple: stand on law, organize for impact, and act for justice.

He insisted that while for the powerful, sovereignty is a sword; for the small, it must remain a shield.

The shield is not a plea for pity; it is a claim to dignity and a demand that conduct be measured against rules that bind all.

If the shield fails, the small have no armour beneath.

XI. The New Realism of Interdependence

This year marks eighty years since the adoption of the United Nations Charter.

In that span, the world has evolved from discrete sovereignties to an intricate, fragile system of interdependence—where the shock of one reverberates through all, as COVID-19 reminded the powerful and the powerless alike.

Trade, technology, finance, migration, disease, and climate have woven the destinies of nations into a single fabric.

In such a world, the creed that "might makes right" is not sustainable. Power without restraint breeds disorder, and coercion corrodes the stability on which all depend.

The inward-looking nationalisms now re-emerging are not cures for complexity.

They may enjoy a season of ascendancy, but the demands for raw materials they do not produce—and for skills and labour they do not possess—will end in regression.

For small states, interdependence has never been a choice; it has always been our starting point.

Therefore, in an age when power fragments and uncertainty multiplies, Caribbean integration is not romanticism; it is realism.

It is the recognition that cooperation, stability, and predictability are not luxuries, but conditions of existence itself.

XII. Reclaiming Justice in an Age of Power—Small States, Collective Alliances, and New Frontiers of Sovereignty

The inequality of sovereignty is the central contradiction of our time: a doctrine that proclaims equality yet operates through hierarchy.

It is visible in the veto of five states at the Security Council; in the dominance of wealthy shareholders over multilateral banks; in trade negotiations where capacity, not merit, decides outcomes; and in climate diplomacy where those least responsible for the crisis struggle most to fund their survival.

For small and vulnerable states, especially in the Caribbean and Pacific, sovereignty is both precious and precarious.

We face the paradox of dependence: compelled to engage the global system to survive and forced to make concessions that erode autonomy.

Economic fragility, limited defence capacity, and exposure to climate and financial shocks narrow the practical meaning of independence.

Yet it is precisely because of these vulnerabilities that sovereignty matters most; it affirms the moral equality of nations even when material equality is impossible.

That is why Article 2(1) of the UN Charter remains vital.

It affirms that “the Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.”

Though often ignored, that clause is the lifeline that gives small states legitimacy in the international system.

Today, new frontiers - digital sovereignty in the age of artificial intelligence, climate sovereignty, food sovereignty - reflect efforts to claim space in realms dominated by corporations and major powers.

Sovereignty must be asserted individually but exercised collectively.

Alone, it is easily quashed; together, it becomes leverage.

For small states, survival depends on cooperation, not confrontation—on collective strength, not individual assertion.

Regional and international alliances, such as CARICOM, the OECS, and the Alliance of Small Island States, transform weakness into influence by speaking with one voice on climate, debt, and development finance.

When that collective standing is exercised consistently and coherently, our nations give themselves the chance to exist in dignity—with culture and identity intact.

XIII. Courage for Caribbean rights

Let me return to where I began—with Ramphal, and with the enduring paradox of sovereignty for small states.

The international system was never built to equalize strength; it was built to keep strength in check.

That is why sovereignty has always worn two faces.

In law, it proclaims a noble equality: each state, large or small, vested with the same rights and duties under the Charter.

In practice, it is filtered through the hard architecture of power—military reach, financial weight, technological command.

This lecture has walked deliberately between these twin understandings.

The legal definition points to what should be: sovereign equality, non-intervention, the peaceful settlement of disputes.

Political realism begins with what is: the brutal facts of power, coercion, and dependency.

XIV. Accommodation between large and small powers – give to get

Yet these ideas do not have to collide; they can be reconciled if we accept that international law shapes power over time, disciplining it, coaxing it, nudging it toward restraint that states accept because they recognize their own long-term interest in a more predictable world.

In that sense, both the mighty and the small must be persuaded—through reason and reciprocity, by which even the powerful see benefit—to accept limits on their autonomy out of enlightened self-interest.

The old doctrines of absolute sovereignty, and the old formulas of development and aid, must give way.

Only then can we build a revised international order in which cooperation is truly a two-way street—one that acknowledges the realities of power yet anchors them in human rights and humanitarian law that give small states a chance not only to survive, but to prosper.

XV. The role of Law

Law will never abolish power politics, but it can redirect it; it can tame the turbulence of international "anarchy," guiding the struggle for advantage into forums, courts, and negotiations where reasoned argument replaces unrestrained force.

But this does not grant small states the luxury of passivity.

Our task is to insist—quietly, steadily—that law matters, that promises carry weight, and that rules apply as faithfully to those who craft them as to those who must live under them.

Our task is not to bow before any new order that seeks to turn might into right, but to ensure that the old patterns of dominance never regain legitimacy.

Caution has its place, but so does courage.

We must continue to affirm that law binds the powerful no less than the powerless—because if we cease to affirm it, we surrender the only shield we possess.

Sovereignty, at its core, is the freedom to choose one's path without coercion.

For the powerful, that freedom is taken for granted; for the small, it must be protected and it must be protected together.

That is the real work of Caribbean integration today.

And that is why, even when the storms rise around us, we must continue to stand on law and for law—not because law always shields us, but because without it there is no ground left on which to stand.

If the obliteration of tiny Melos by imperial Athens was the tragedy of a world without conscience, then the post-Melian world must be its redemption.

Each generation must decide whether to live by Athens' cold maxim—that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must"—or by Sir Shridath's quiet certainty that true law is not confined to charters or treaties; it lives wherever people choose fairness over force, peace over dominance, dignity over disdain.

XV1. Conclusion

And so, as we honour Sir Shridath Ramphal, let us renew our commitment to that conviction: that the strong need not do what they can, nor the weak suffer what they must—but that all, bound by justice, may walk as equals under law.

Sir Shridath taught us that small states can speak to great powers with dignity when they speak in the language of law.

Let us do so—calmly, firmly, together—and make the Caribbean not a stage for other people's power, but a platform for our voice raised in unison for our rights.

It is a task for which the Organization of Commonwealth Caribbean Bar Associations and its members are ably suited.

Thank you.