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AMBASSADOR OF ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA TO THE UNITED STATES AND THE
OAS, HIGH COMMISSIONER (NON-RESIDENT) TO CANADA
AT A SEMINAR OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS IN ANTIGUA
ON 30TH OCTOBER, 2019

Today's world is characterised by a new polarisation of states, emphasised most particularly by the present government of the United States which has adumbrated, and implements, a policy of "America first".

That term, "America first" did not originate with President Donald Trump, although he is today its principal proponent.

It was the mantra of extreme right-wing organisations in the US, including the Ku-Klux-Klan, between the first and second world wars.

There were more than a few sympathisers for Hitler's Nazi Germany and other fascist movements in Europe, including Mussolini's in Italy.

In the United Kingdom, at the same time, the slogan among Nazi supporters was "Britain first".

It was used by the fascist, Oswald Mosely, in the creation of the British Union of Fascists which also emerged between the two world wars.

Mosely and his movement were dedicated to ridding Britain of Jews and other ethnic groups.

The term, therefore, had its origins in notions of ethnic superiority, including racism.

It found recent expression in the characterisation of nations in Africa and the Caribbean as 'shit hole countries'.

In the event, this re-ignited term of 'America first' has led to a shift away from multilateralism and to a focus on bilateral bargaining in which power – economic and military – is increasingly being used to advance the interests of the powerful.

This has manifested itself in trade wars as in the renegotiation of NAFTA and the imposition of tariffs on goods between the US and China.

We have also witnessed it in the attempts to marginalise the World Trade Organisation, ignore internationally negotiated trade rules, and in the undermining of the dispute settlement machinery of the WTO.

It has led to an intolerance of the international system which is based on multilateral cooperation, respect for international institutions and commitments to upholding the principles laid out in the Charters of the UN and the Organisation of American States.

Among those key principles are respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-intervention in the internal affairs of states.

As a small state in a world of countries much larger than ourselves, multilateralism and the rules of the international system are Antigua and Barbuda's shield against economic and military aggression; it is the safeguard of our rights in an international community where the doctrine of might is right has raised its ugly head.

At the opening of the recently held Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, the President of Cuba, Miguel Diaz Canel Bermudez, expressed concerns over this shift to unilateralism.

His was a Cuban voice.

But the sentiments he expressed reflected a chorus of unease of most developing states.

He said:

“Others may remain indifferent to the contempt openly shown by the US and other governments for the just claims of the South nations; to the obscene politicization of human rights and the flagrant disrespect for the right of peoples to determine their political, socio-economic, and cultural system; to the lack of commitment to multilateralism and international treaties”.

And he asked very pertinent questions that I now repeat.

“Why does military spending continue to be irrationally increased while the investment in development and cooperation is being reduced?

“Why is the seriousness of climate change being underestimated when it threatens the existence of Small Island States and the survival of the whole humankind?

“Why do not we silence weapons and compensate the most underdeveloped and impoverished nations for their plunder by giving them a fair, special and differentiated treatment?”

The President’s questions were rhetorical.

We know the answers.

And they are deeply disturbing.

Each of the answers point to a disregard for the threats that are posed to developing countries, and more particularly to small states such as ours that are weak in military and economic terms.

We could also ask: why is the United Nations Organisation, facing a severe shortage of cash which, according to Secretary-General, António Guterres, runs the risk of depleting its liquidity reserves by the end of this month and crippling its operations.

64 of the UN’s 193 member states have not yet paid their 2019 assessed contributions and many have outstanding arrears.

But the most significant among the late payers is the United States, the country with the largest assessed contribution based on its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and other factors.

Withholding money from international agencies has long been an instrument in the toolbox of powerful governments.

It holds them to ransom.

By not paying, their real intention is to either to cripple the UN or make it obedient.

Multilateralism that gives a voice and a vote even to the smallest country deprives bullying nations of the opportunity to impose their will.

Every day, in every Committee of the UN (and hemispheric organizations such as the OAS), powerful countries coerce weaker ones to support their positions.

That coercion comes in many forms, including preying on fears of punishment; promises to provide them help; and even veiled threats.

Some Governments of small countries, so coerced, instead of exposing it, often opt to disguise their surrender, claiming, unconvincingly, that their stance is a manifestation of their own values.

But, the UN remains a vital organisation for the protection and advancement of the interests of countries such as Antigua and Barbuda.

If it did not exist, small countries would want to invent it to address many global issues that none of them could cope with it alone.

These include climate change, global warming, controlling the spread of diseases, drug trafficking, organised crime, and money laundering.

Without the UN and its agencies, the voices of small countries would not be heard, nor would their negotiators have a seat at the bargaining table to negotiate better terms of trade and access to financing in the global market.

In our own hemisphere, there have been deeply troubling developments.

Over the last 2 and half years, the Organisation of American States has increasingly become an instrument for the imposition of the will of a few powerful countries.

The principles of the Charter have been ignored, and the rules of the organisation manipulated or disregarded to achieve the objectives of a few.

This was particularly obvious in two glaring instances.

The first was the seating of a representative of Juan Guaido, the so-called Interim President of Venezuela, as the legitimate government of Venezuela even as the Maduro Government remains firmly in charge of the country.

The second was the activation by 10 countries of an anachronistic 1947 Treaty - the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance - signed in Rio in the context of a world that had just emerged from World War II.

It was a world -72 years ago - in which CARICOM countries, except for Haiti, were all colonies, as were most countries of Asia, Africa and the Pacific.

The United States was the rising, but dominant, power of the Americas, and Canada was still a dominion of the British Crown.

Cuba, under Batista, was in thrall to mafia criminal enterprises from the US, and Latin American countries were ruled by undemocratic juntas for the most part.

It was this unrepresentative and outmoded Treaty, which allowed for the invasion of countries in this hemisphere, that was resurrected from the dustbin of history to which it belonged.

The objective of its resurrection was clearly set out in a notice that accompanied the resolution to invoke it.

It claimed, without any supporting evidence, that “a series of developments and situations, which are as a consequence of the Venezuelan crisis, pose a threat to peace in the Americas and [-] affect the inviolability or the integrity of the territory or the sovereignty or political independence of various American states”.

Spuriously it went on to say: “It is for that reason that measures need to be adopted by the member states of the (Rio Treaty) based on the principles of inter-American solidarity and cooperation established in said instrument”.

Venezuela was thereby set-up for “measures” that would be agreed by a two-thirds vote of the Foreign Ministers of the claimed 19 signatory countries at a meeting which was held last month.

One of those countries, incidentally, is Cuba, which denounced the Treaty in 1962 but which the others refused to remove from its membership, in the forlorn hope that the ambition of toppling the Cuban regime would be achieved and a more supine government would take its place.

If there was any doubt that the 10 governments plus Guaidó’s representative had anything but military force in mind, that doubt disappeared when, by virtue of their simple majority of the claimed 19 signatories, they spurned an amendment from Costa Rica which proposed that any “measures” would exclude “those that may involve the use of armed force”.

So, clearly, armed force was very much in the collective minds of the governments that eventually pushed through the resolution at the OAS.

Alarmingly – and ludicrously – the resolution was adopted in the name of the Permanent Council of the OAS, even though 15 member states have no connection with the Rio Treaty and could not vote, and 5 of the signatory states did not support it.

Sadly, governments of countries, which themselves have been the victims of invasion, supported this resolution which, in the words of the Mexican

Ambassador, Luz Elena Baños Rivas, “inextricably entails the possibility of the use of force [-] and is contrary to international law”.

Among the governments that supported the invocation of the Rio Treaty was the government of Haiti, a CARICOM member state.

It is nothing short of shameful that a handful of countries would invoke a 72-year old, outdated treaty in today’s world to try to accomplish the crushing of a government they dislike.

Today, Venezuela; tomorrow who, and to serve whose interests?

Let me make it clear that Antigua and Barbuda has stood-up against every one of these developments and our voice has been raised in objection.

We have argued vigorously that peace and security is increasingly endangered in the hemisphere, as are the purposes of the OAS as set out in the obligations of its Charter to achieve an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence.

Our position has been clear: If the rule of law is to mean anything within countries, it must be seen to mean something between them.

Values honoured domestically are devalued when they are set aside internationally.

There are other issues in the international community that hang over our heads like the sword of Damocles.

Climate change and Global warming are among them.

Climate Change is no longer a future event.

It is here, now and real.

Planet Earth, mankind’s common homeland, appears to be already locked into 1.5C of warming, once hoped to be the top limit of human-caused climate change.

The world is now set to storm its way through the 2C limit set by the much vaunted but inadequate agreement reached in Paris in 2016.

In a recent report to the UN Human Rights Council, Professor Philip Alston, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights stated:

“Sombre speeches by government officials at regular conferences are not leading to meaningful action as States continue to kick the can down the road. The essential elements of climate change were understood in the 1970s, and scientists and advocates have been ringing alarm bells for decades. Yet States have marched past every scientific warning and threshold, and what was once considered catastrophic warming now seems like a best-case scenario”.

According to the World Bank, 18.8 million people were displaced in 2017 due to disasters in 135 countries—almost twice the number displaced by conflict.

First-hand experience of Barbuda allows us to testify to the displacement of entire populations and the creation of ‘climate refugees’.

Since 2000, people in poor countries have died from disasters at rates seven times higher than in wealthy countries.

Researchers from Stanford University have already warned that climate change is widening global inequality between nations.

A kind of ‘climate apartheid’ is developing which will lead to rich countries insulating themselves from extremes of weather while locking-out from their borders people seeking to escape heat stress, vector diseases, lack of water supply and little capacity to grow food.

The measures put in place are plasters for the enlarging sore of climate change that requires a meaningful international response from the large, polluting industrialised countries – and these include China and India, in addition to the United States, and countries in Europe and Australasia.

No country can prepare for the total devastation of an island such as occurred on Barbuda in 2017.

The governments of developing countries, especially small ones, can’t force the governments of industrialised countries to pay, but they should at least trumpet that grudging handouts are not reparations and declare loudly that inadequate funding cannot sustain the future.

As the UN Special Rapporteur pointed out: “Ticking boxes will not save humanity or the planet from impending disaster”.

Polluters should be named and blamed.

And our voice should never be muted until the problem is effectively acknowledged and meaningfully addressed.

We are confronted with other challenges that threaten the livelihood and well being of our people.

The most urgent is the phenomenon of de-risking and the withdrawal of correspondent banking relations (CBRs) by global banks in the US and the UK from respondent banks in the Caribbean, including Antigua and Barbuda.

Over the last 3 years, 55 banks in 12 Caribbean countries have lost CBRs.

If this trend continues, our region is faced with the real danger of being cut off from the world's financial and trading system

The consequences are too dire to contemplate.

Much work has been devoted to addressing this troubling issue with the objective of halting it, if not reversing it.

I am happy to tell you that, last Monday, after months of diverse work, including a visit to Washington two weeks ago by Prime Minister Browne, we succeeded in securing a date for a US Congressional hearing on this issue on November 17th 19 days from now.

The hearing will bring together legislators and bankers on the US side with Caribbean representatives on the other, under the auspices of the Financial Services Committee of the US House of Representatives.

Antigua and Barbuda was in the forefront of this effort, and we have good reason for being pleased that we have prised open the door for a high level dialogue from which solutions could emerge.

Not all the news on the financial services front is that promising.

This year, in its continuous assault on small jurisdictions, the European Union year placed 15 small territories on a list of what it calls 'non-cooperative jurisdictions'.

What the European Commission considers these territories to be “non-cooperative” about reveals the raw exercise of power by the strong over the weak.

The language that the EU uses speaks of cooperation, but it sounds more like coercion.

The targeted countries must either surrender to the EU’s demands or face consequences.

The EU Council has specifically directed that the EU member states “take the revised EU list of non-cooperative jurisdictions into account” in aid, trade, and financing.

In other words, those territories that do not surrender to EU tax demands will be punished.

According to the EU Council, the lower levels of taxation set by over 60 countries harm European governments’ revenues.

The theory of this unproven contention is that EU countries are losing tax revenues because of the “harmful”, lower tax levels of other countries.

Yet, the EU Council has not conducted or published any research to prove its claim.

The EU has operated as if it is enough for its Council and Commission to make this assertion for it to be true.

The sadness of all this for small countries is that this steady erosion of their rights could have been nipped in the bud.

In the late 1990s, a strong alliance of small states, crying out at the advantage that was being taken of them contrary to international law, caused the OECD, and the EU within it, to pause.

Had they remained resolute in their resistance, the picture may have been different now.

But, the OECD and the EU reset their strategy.

They picked-off governments of small countries one by one through different forms of persuasion.

The problem with ceding rights is that it never stops.

As Richard Hay of the London-based legal firm, Stikeman Elliot, points out: “Those countries that have accepted EU dictation on design of their domestic laws to avoid being blacklisted now have a foot on the escalator – the EU will be back for more next year and in the years following”.

So, where do we as a nation stand in all this?

And what is the role of the foreign ministry and its Embassies and High Commissions?

VC Bird, first Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, setting out, before a Joint Session of Both Houses of Parliament, the foreign policy of the newly born nation of Antigua and Barbuda on November 1st, 1981 articulated a clear policy for this country.

That policy is as compelling today as it was 38 years ago.

He said:

“There are certain fundamental principles which will guide our approach to external relations.

First, we extend the hand of friendship to all.

But the hand of friendship should not be misinterpreted as an invitation to dictate our policies.

Such friendship must be on the basis of mutual respect.

Second, a cardinal principle of our external policy is the strengthening of the relationship with our sister states in the OECS and CARICOM.

Third, while we recognise ideological pluralism as a fact of the international system, we will resist adventures by anyone to extend their philosophy into our borders.

Fourth, in exercising judgement on international questions, we will do so against a background of our people’s values and aspirations.

We will not do so because of pressure – economic or political.

The preservation of the dignity and self-respect of the Antiguan and Barbudan people will be the common thread weaving the pattern of our foreign relations.

Fifth, we abhor racial bigotry and prejudice in all its forms.

We will strenuously condemn it and fight against it at every juncture.

Sixth, our approach to external affairs is a commitment to work for a new international economic order; to attempt to achieve a better deal for developing states; to create a world built less on power and more on economic justice.

We are determined to marry principle with practicality; we will try to fashion an approach that will, at the very least, advance our own development while contributing to global peace and well-being”.

Against that background, do we not have a responsibility and an obligation to fight for our nation’s rights against events such as: the harmful effects of climate change; against the threats to our wellbeing posed by de-risking and the withdrawal of correspondent banking relations; against the imposition upon us of measures that curb our earnings from the Citizenship by Investment Programme and from the financial services that we offer?

The answer is obviously and emphatically, yes.

However, except at times of crisis, foreign ministries and their embassies or high commissions abroad are credited with little value.

Yet, diplomacy, which is the work of foreign ministries and their overseas missions, is the only instrument available to small states to further their national interests in an international community that is increasingly intolerant of small countries.

In this regard, our foreign ministry and its diplomatic missions, properly functioning, should play a vital role in defending and promoting the interests of Antigua and Barbuda.

It is a role that should be continuously strengthened by utilizing the best persons available for diplomatic tasks, especially negotiating skills, and adequately resourcing their operations.

When the scissors-men in finance ministries, struggle to balance budgets or confront fiscal deficits, the usual area selected for the chopping block is foreign affairs - the business of advancing and defending the nation’s interests abroad.

In her book, “Fascism – A Warning”, Madeleine Albright, a former U.S. Secretary of State and Professor at Georgetown University, describes the tools

of foreign policy available to U.S. governments as a range between “making polite requests to sending in the marines”.

Offers could include “boxes of seeds” or “shipload of tanks”.

Pressure could be applied “on the recalcitrant” by enlisting “international organizations to reinforce our requests” as has happened in the OAS.

Threats could include “economic and security sanctions”, “displays of military prowess in the country’s front yard”. And “covert means to disrupt a country’s activities”.

Small countries, like ours, have no weapons in its foreign policy arsenal that match those of the U.S. government or even of governments with far less power.

In the execution of their foreign policies, small states cannot call on the influence of military or economic means; diplomacy is the only tool available to them.

Where diplomatic work is actually done, it involves lengthy meetings; tough negotiations; crafting language that safeguards a nation’s interest; standing ground even in the face of bullying by representatives of powerful countries; acting to keep one’s country off black lists that would harm the economy; arguing against arbitrary reports that adversely affects a nation’s interests in tourism and financial services and threatens its participation in the world’s banking and trading system; and standing-up for respect for international law and the rules of the international system without which the rights, independence and territorial integrity of one’s country would be even more jeopardized than they already are.

In other words, working in the interest of the livelihood and well-being of every man, woman and child in their home countries.

Therefore, diplomacy and the machinery for deploying it, should not be undervalued.

It is both a shield and a sword in the struggle for small states in their causes in the international community.

The solution to effective international representation in the global community is well-trained and competent diplomatic personnel who understand that the purpose of their vocation is to negotiate with states and agencies to safeguard

their country's rights and security, and to promote and advance its economic and social development, including forming alliances with others when interests coincide.

Diplomacy should not be discounted; countries in every area of the world invest in it for the benefits it can deliver when properly executed.

That is the task we have before us.

But we will not achieve it unless we are a joined-up team, sharing information, working together, recognising that we have a shared purpose and a common objective.

Every team is only as strong as its weakest link.

Diplomacy requires personal courage; it requires bargaining skills; it requires the capacity to garner, with intellectual rigour, the arguments that will sway votes and garner support.

It is not an 8 to 4 office job; it knows no "after hours", no weekends and no holidays.

We are the gatekeepers of the nation's wellbeing in the global arena.

We are the bell ringers when dangers emerge.

We are the warriors who should go forth to defend the nation's interests and to fight for its rights.

That is the noble task to which we have been called.

Thank you