

IMPLEMENTING THE CARIBBEAN TOURISM STRATEGIC PLAN

by
BY THE HON. OBIE WILCHCOMBE

MINISTER OF TOURISM OF THE BAHAMAS AND CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF CTO, Chairpersons: Hon Bill Rammel, Minister responsible for relations with the Caribbean, Foreign and Commonwealth Office of Great Britain and the Hon. Aloun N'Doumnet Assamba, Minister of Tourism and Sport, Jamaica, Colleague Ministers of CTO, Your Excellencies and other Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Mr. Simon Suarez, President of the Caribbean Hotel Association, Other Travel and Tourism colleagues, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of the Media.

Let me begin by paying tribute to those persons in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the various High Commissions in London who had the foresight and sagacity to organize this all-Caribbean Policy Workshop on tourism. Its objective, as I understand it, is to distinguish the core issues around which tourism might be made more central to the policy dialogue. Its timeliness and importance have been underscored by the impressive response to the call for consultation and the matters forming our two day agenda are already impatient of debate. I am confident that the quality and far reaching nature of the decisions made will reflect the high hopes with which we crossed an ocean to participate.

Those of us from the other side of the Atlantic who must bear the responsibility, as Ministers of Tourism, for directing the fortunes of the Caribbean tourism industry, are all too conscious of the grave burden we have undertaken. We serve that region of the world which is four times more dependent on the tourism industry than any other region of the world. We labour in the sector which, in many of our countries, has the responsibility for creating the majority of jobs, earning the most foreign currency which is needed to finance economic development and for generating government revenue, without which the social services so critical to sustainable tourism development could not be paid for.

We see a growing dependence on our industry as other economic sectors falter under the weight of increased competition, spiraling costs of production and less than optimum conditions in the terms of trade.

Within our own countries, while the cost of doing tourism business rises, we have to compete with other deserving sectors for a share of ever dwindling national budget resources.

But let me go further. In the world outside, however small our countries may be, our local industry is in competition with that of all the rest of the world engaged in international tourism. No allowances are made for small size or slender resources. We benefit from no preferences in tourism nor do we access our critical inputs at special prices. On the contrary, our special circumstances of limited resource endowment, force us to offer a product which is generally regarded as high cost and we are left with no recourse except to come to market with a product that must compete on quality rather than price.

In the meantime the world around us continues to redefine the concepts of large and small. In the new Global Village small states and small enterprises are legitimately being seen as mini-states and mini-enterprises as our competition consolidates and vertically integrates into monopolies and oligopolies both nationally and across international borders.

In the world of travel and tourism, these trends have accelerated to a point and at a pace, that have so transformed the decision making process that, if we are to survive, if we are to avoid small states such as ours from being marginalized in international political and commercial negotiations, we must have some form of regulated world, with rules in the formation of which we participate, rules which seek to ensure that competition is not only free but fair.

In addition, in the related areas of information technology and communications, so critical now to doing business in our industry, developments move at lightening speed, with a yawning gap, the digital divide, daily separating those who know from those who do not and those who have, from those who have not.

All this has made this industry of ours more complex. Acts of God and Acts of man have expanded the boundaries of tourism concerns, to the extent that a tourism minister is as preoccupied with the impacts of international terrorism and the terms of international trade as he was formerly with what now seem to be the rather more routine challenges of putting warm bodies into beds in a fiercely competitive global environment.

For all the above reasons, this Policy Workshop could not have been more timely. We are deeply appreciative of the fact that you on this of the Atlantic, Britain and the other countries of the European Union, are demonstrating your interest in, and concern about, our Caribbean affairs in general and our tourism affairs in particular.

While we take none of this for granted, there is good reason for this mutuality of interests. The history and the fortunes of Europe and the Caribbean have been intertwined for centuries. For years migrant families while helping to build your communities have helped to support their families from within your borders and our primary products have found ready and preferential markets among your consumers. What is now a matter for comment is not the fact that some 26 per cent of our visitors now come from Europe, but that it took so long for the numbers to reach this level. Tourism is a living example of a truly symbiotic relationship between the peoples of the Caribbean and Europe, joined as it were at the hip, through history, culture, race, religion and trade and it was inevitable that in the your search for rest, recreation and revitalization, your needs should best be met among a people where climatic conditions and cultural heritage conspire to provide a desirable result. At a more material and less philosophical level, it is a matter of fact, that the European Travel Trade, airlines, cruise lines, Travel Agents, Tour Operators, advertising and Public Relations companies, inter alia, are major beneficiaries of the Caribbean Tourism Industry.

Throughout the next two days, many participants will rehearse the happenings and events that befell our world on 9th September 2001 and thereafter. The litany of woes caused by economic decline in our major source market countries, terrorism, wars and rumours of wars, the sudden appearance of the SARS virus, and their deleterious impact on our industry will be told and retold several times over.

However, our countries are no strangers to hardship, nor are we unfamiliar with crises of various kinds. Our region, perhaps because it has always been blessed with, and bathed in, brilliant sunshine, continues to look on the bright side. We are an optimistic people and we recognize that even in the midst of the unhappy events of the past two years, some blessings fell on us because our region was perceived as a haven of peace, safety and tranquility. We built on that advantage, in many cases, with creative marketing by those countries which had the resources to invest. Unhappily many of our smaller countries do not have those resources and since we are all in the same boat we must take collective steps to make the journey safe for all.

Even before the events of 9/11, we recognized that the tourism industry which had grown to become the world's largest industry was changing radically and that our approaches, systems and institutions in the region needed to mirror that change. We faced new and old competition that had already begun to re-invent its product, intensify its marketing and promotional strategies, and re-engineer its operations and its institutions, with a view to taking our marketshare.

We too, have started on a journey of transformation, the first step of which was the creation of the Caribbean Tourism Strategic Plan about which much will be said here in the next two days. We have however encountered a bump in the road which has to do with creating the resources needed to accomplish the task.

I believe it to be incumbent upon me as Chairman of the Caribbean Tourism Organization which was responsible for giving life to the Strategic Plan out of a series of public and private sector technical papers, to say something at the very outset of this Workshop, about the critical importance of the Plan and the need to find the resources necessary for its implementation.

Many of you will have heard that in June 2003, the Ministers and Commissioners of Tourism which are members of CTO, met in New York and discussed the creation of a Sustainable Tourism Development Fund through imposing a levy on tickets purchased by consumers taking cruises scheduled to include visits to CTO member states.

The reason why I raise these two matters here today simultaneously, is that the far ranging and often inflammatory debate which has attended wide spread discussions on the levy, has failed to connect the two.

We have agreed, at the level of the CTO Ministers and Commissioners of Tourism, on the key role which the Plan can, and must play, in Caribbean Tourism Development.

Heads of Government of the CARICOM Community have signed off on the Plan.

The next step is to find the resources on an annual basis to make the implementation of the Plan a reality and those resources needed at the regional level must be found from somewhere.

The Plan itself contemplates that international Donors would be invited to discuss the details of the Plan and, if they bought into its objectives, requested to contribute to financing its implementation. I hope therefore that we will address this aspect during the next two days.

What is important and crucial therefore, is that funds must be found to finance the Plan, either as is or as amended, and any failure to raise them through the imposition of a cruise ticket will in

no way remove the obligation on Caribbean governments and the regional private sector, to find the resources we need.

I wish in the short time remaining, therefore to give some insights into the thinking behind the Plan and to commend it to our friends and supporters in Europe as a strategic approach to meeting some of the development needs of our region through tourism. If the plan in its current form has any significant weakness, it is that it did not address the urgent need which now presents itself, to define more clearly how our members states need to position the tourism industry in the global, hemispheric and region negotiations on Trade in Services. Happily it not yet too late for that error to be corrected.

First , our strategy in the Plan was illuminated by a vision which emphasized planning within a national framework of socio-economic, cultural and environment development, environmental best practice, a quality tourism product, a profitable industry, job and revenue generation, better air access, maximizing benefits from cruise tourism, effective and sustained marketing, optimization of the use of information technology, creating cadres of tourism professionals with the skills set needed in today's environment, and not least of all, effective and harmonious partnership between the public and private sectors.

We also committed ourselves to a number of strategic objectives and in spite of the turmoil of the past two years, we are sufficiently optimistic about the resilience, both of tourism as a sector , and of the Caribbean industry and its people, that we feel confident about achieving in 2012, the rates of growth which we set for ourselves in 2001.

All this we intend to do, while increasing tourism's economic impact, achieving a more equitable distribution of its benefits, creating a sustainable tourism product that is delivered in a safe and healthy environment, modernizing our industry, achieving synergies and economies of scale by greater cooperation among all the elements of the industry and creating sources of adequate and sustainable funding.

We have also begun to address our energies, though late in the day, to positioning tourism as a key sector in the negotiations on trade in services and seeking, as one of the world's leading tourism areas, to give leadership in those discussions in whatever arena they are taking place.

Colleague Ministers, Partners in Caribbean Tourism Development, Friends and Supporters from Europe, we at the Caribbean Tourism Organization, have already sought within our slender resources, to begin to implement a number of programmes related to this Plan. It cannot however be successfully implemented by a process of financial drip-feeding. It cannot be implemented unless we are prepared to work together, country with country, public and private sector, in a state of harmony and of mutual respect. It cannot be implemented, unless we are prepared to commit to the necessary courses of action and then to follow through with those commitments.

Once more I end by congratulating all those responsible for the convening of this Workshop, which I see as a totally good idea, and I look forward to participating in a lively and productive discussion.

[Back to Regional Connection](#)

