

Reflection on expectations for the II CELAC-EU Summit and how the potential of the strategic partnership CELAC-EU could be maximised for the Caribbean countries

*by Hon. Frederick A. Mitchell**

The truth is that the reasons for the coming together of the Latin American and Caribbean States (now, the Community, CELAC, using the Spanish acronym) and European Union (EU) some sixteen years ago in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the institutional relationship now called the CELAC-EU have not changed that much. This is evident in the anticipated outcomes of the upcoming summit in Brussels, and the process towards them remains challenging.

The theme of the Brussels Declaration (“Shaping our common future: working together for prosperous, inclusive, cohesive and sustainable societies for our citizens”), the Political Declaration (“A partnership for the next generation”), and the areas of focus for the related Action Plan on this occasion include the very issues on which the relationship had its genesis in 1999 – among them in no particular order, education and higher education, employment, promotion of social inclusion and cohesion, citizen security, migration, sustainable development, environment, climate change, biodiversity, and energy.

Neither has the sense of urgency in addressing the common points really changed.

What has changed, or perhaps more appropriately what is changing, is the severity of the impact of the multiplicity of converging global factors on the domestic and regional priorities. What has also changed is the number of players with meaningful roles to play in redressing or advancing the approaches to solutions.

The words in the working versions of the outcome documents of this II CELAC-EU Summit hit all marks but the reality is the absolute need to render these words into reality, into action. Speaking with respect to CELAC, this reality for our states is a tough one. The realisation (in both senses of the word) of this is of fundamental importance – an imperative.

In my estimation, the transition from LAC into CELAC means that there has to be an understanding of what the Community of individual member-states can do to unify into a better partner. The impetus for this is appreciation of the fact that there is a need to move away from the conduct of business as usual and strive for the level of control required to reach that intention.

The Caribbean Community has availed itself of this evolving regional relationship to advance some of its principal concerns to the fore of the international community. It is the hope that the fourteen voices it presently uses will find added value with the nineteen more from Latin America. These thirty-three voices now are seeking new theatres in which to express themselves

in concert. Certainly the United Nations, the European Union and the People's Republic of China have been the most recent arenas, and more are being sought, in partnership with other countries and multilateral institutions. The publication of the terms of reference for these partnerships has resonated, in some form or fashion, the most recent example being the rapprochement between the United States of America and the Republic of Cuba. The negotiations on sustainable development and climate change have found a new vigour through the sense of exigency – not just urgency – expressed, once again, in a united way by those most severely affected.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has been together for many decades in a similar fashion, successfully in some areas, challenged in others. Nevertheless, the mission continues. For CARICOM, the themes reiterated in recent times through CELAC fora need to be mentioned here:

- Promoting opportunities for investment in energy, including renewable energy, oil and gas exploration and production, forestry, mining in areas such as gold, diamonds and bauxite, infrastructure development, tourism, airline services, financial services, agriculture and fisheries;
- Pursuing a low carbon strategy and investments in solar power and other renewable energy sources such as geo-thermal, wind and hydro;
- Supporting adaptation and mitigation measures. Energy, water, sanitation, coastal protection, and protection of critical coastal infrastructure are central to the capacity of our countries to adapt to, and mitigate, the effects of climate change. Citing the Bahamian reality, the reality is that a five-foot rise in sea level would eliminate 80 per cent of The Bahamas. Climate change is real for The Bahamas. It is a threat to our very existence;
- Working together to eliminate GDP per capita as the determinant criterion for denying or allowing us access to concessional financing. CARICOM would like to see greater participation of emerging market economies based on legitimacy, fair representation, responsiveness and flexibility. In island nations and small states, there are disparities and differences in development. As such, GDP per capita does not adequately reflect those developmental differences; and
- Human capital development.

To some degree, the presentation of these priorities in avenues opened by CELAC has found success. Certainly within CELAC, Caribbean and Latin American concerns have caused mutual arrangements to be considered, advanced and forged, and bilateral agreements to be signed.

All of the major global issues are on the table of this summit – which include those of CARICOM – giving the impression that this anniversary year of the United Nations is acting as

a milestone catalyst for the renewed focus and sense of purpose for the world – certainly for CELAC – on issues of critical import. The vulnerability of the Caribbean Sub-region in the face of all of these issues is evident. In the same posture as the European Countries took to ensure a united front to address their political, economic and social woes and concerns, so is the CELAC endeavouring to move forward in a united manner, hoping to make a meaningful progress in the face of the manifest challenges.

It may seem like a re-launch in thought. In fact, I want to believe that this common approach is one based on the understanding that, as a region, the Member-States of this community are looking to be a better partner in all global endeavours. There is no time like the present to act, particularly when the present is always with us. The future is in fact now, and to affect the future, we need to act on the present. There is a pervasive sense of urgency with respect to the direction in which the world seems to be heading. The success of this new common approach can only happen if we who suffer from a common set of conditions come together to dialogue on a common set of issues and formulate a foundational platform from which to dive into the global attempt by all countries to save themselves.

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