



**Address by the Honourable Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda
at the Opening of the 33rd Annual Conference of CANTO
in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic
on 16th July 2017**

"Reimagining ICT as a Tool for National Growth and Development."

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for the honour of inviting me to deliver the feature address at your 33rd Annual Conference, which has been described as the Caribbean's premier telecoms event.

It is a privilege to do so, particularly at a time when your business: – Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – is at the cusp of the Caribbean's economic development.

I know you have a long agenda.

Therefore, be assured that as Elizabeth Taylor said to her seventh husband, "I will not detain you long".

Today, we are witnessing a global ICT revolution. Our generation has been truly blessed to be living at an inflection point, a point of significant development in human history.

My friends, ICT has already brought enormous benefits to the people of the world and of our region.

Innovations in information technology have transformed the way we think, the way we do business and even our everyday lives.

In the words of the American satirist, Andy Borowitz: “What did people do when they went to the bathroom before smart phones”?

That is a comment in jest, but it tells a more important story.

The story is that ICT – and its innovations – are an essential part of the lives of almost everyone in our society.

The greatest contemporary panic among young and old people, especially couples; is when they can't find their mobile phones. In fact, the attendant "cyber-panic" from losing custody of one's phone, is even more severe than the evolving cyber threats. This threat is so dangerous, it could lead to physical harm or estrangement, when the phone is inadvertently left unattended by an unfaithful partner, for the prying eyes of the other. By the way, I am not speaking from experience.

At a more serious level, the American business man Steve Ballmer has sagely observed that:

“The number one benefit of information technology is that, it empowers people. It empowers people to do what they want to do. It lets people be creative. It lets people be productive. It lets people learn things they didn't think they could learn before”.

Information Communication Technology drives development. It is everywhere and the promotion of ICT's is everyone's business and everyone's responsibility.

In this regard, let me do what is not often done.

Let me compliment CANTO for the knowledge sharing and capacity building this conference provides.

Also, I thank the providers of ICT in the Caribbean – for investing in, and delivering, the information highways that facilitate the traffic of communication for our people.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the investment that your companies have made in the delivery of modern technology, has catapulted our countries into the modern and competitive global society, like no other development in human existence.

But, you should remember that many of your companies were and are being incentivised by governments to assist your investment.

Governments gave tax-free holidays and duty-free concessions.

So, there was and is a partnership – a partnership between governments and you the operators – to achieve that rapid and necessary transition into the digital world of communication.

And its effects are felt at many levels, including in small villages where their impact is significant and unmatched in terms of speed, instant response and community participation that is life-saving.

I give you two examples from my own country over the last two weeks.

First, an elderly lady – with all the frailties and vulnerabilities of age – went missing, and so, too, a few days later did a teenage girl.

Immediately, their details were posted on Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and other social media, and an entire nation was mobilised in an instant to look out for them.

I am pleased to say that both persons were found and restored to their anxious families and a relieved nation.

But, the speed with which the searches were launched, and the active mobilization of communities across the country would not have been possible without the platforms of instant communication that you provide.

So, thank you for the critical services you provide, not only in giving our region the means to actively participate in the global economy, but also in knitting-together our individual nations in times of need.

Please give yourselves a well-deserved round of applause.

Ladies and Gentlemen, having applauded you as you deserve to be, I must also draw attention to other factors where you need change, if you are to continue to contribute not only to the Caribbean's development but also to ensure your own profitability and sustainability.

Like every other business, if you are thinking about competitiveness and profitability, your first concerns should be the needs of your customers. First, You must consistently provide good quality and efficient service to your customers to maintain and grow your customer base.

If your company fails to grow, it will certainly die. In fact, I have never heard of a successful shrinking institution.

I need hardly tell you that, if you fail to cater for customer needs, you will not long survive as profitable companies, providing your shareholders and investors with the dividends they expect.

The principal concerns of your customers, who include, governments, businesses of every kind and the general public, are access to the most modern technology at the most affordable price.

Our region does not want to be left behind in the benefits of global communication and information.

And, it is to you, the network providers, to whom we look, to keep us in lock-step with those who are marching in the forefront of this digital age of human progress.

I am aware that individually, all our markets are small, and even our collective market is relatively small as a proportion of the global market.

I am also aware that investment in up-to-date technology requires capital, and that capital is not free nor cheap.

It has a price, and unless you and the consumers whom you serve are willing to pay that price, progress will not be swift or comprehensive.

So, I know that it would be unrealistic of governments, regulatory bodies and the general public to expect your companies to invest without fair returns and to operate without meeting costs.

Therefore, what is important on all sides is to strike the right balance - a balance that will encourage investment without gouging; and that will recover costs without exploitation.

In this regard, the decision taken at last week's CARICOM Heads of Government Meeting, with respect to Information and Communication Technologies for Development, provides a golden opportunity, that I urge you all to seize.

The leaders approved a Draft Workplan for a Single ICT Space in the region as a priority.

And they have collectively and publicly invited your participation.

They recognised that implementation of the work plan, would provide an enabling environment for innovation to flourish; for a larger market for investors; and for supporting sustainable increases in growth and jobs.

The linkages between a single ICT space in the Caribbean are significant and now more so than ever before.

For the links are not only important to people to people exchanges, to trade in commodities, in imports and exports; they are also in transport, tourism and nowadays security, including Cyber security.

In this context, there has never been a better or more opportune time for you as network providers to engage with governments – at the national and regional levels - to determine the state of the ICT sector, and to contribute to the elaboration of the plan to implement a single ICT space in the region.

This should also encourage policy formulation that unleashes the creative talents of our people to spur innovation. For, it is vital that we are not just consumers of content but producers as well. We must produce content not only for domestic use but for exportation to earn foreign exchange, for entrepreneurship and job creation.

I call on you not to leave this meeting until you have put agreed machinery in place to engage meaningfully with governments.

The creation of a single ICT space will require governments to share and pool their sovereignty; and to relinquish national laws and regulation to a regional body under their joint guidance.

But the small size of our individual markets and the high costs of modern technological requirements, necessitates wider regional collective action, if we are to serve the demands of our people and our effective participation in the world's economic activity.

Let me also point out that there are opportunities for funding through agencies such as the Caribbean Development Bank and the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank.

You should take advantage of them.

And, I have to say this to you. Just as it is imperative that governments in the region pool their autonomy in order to achieve the optimum size of market and regulatory machinery that is necessary, so is it incumbent upon you to combine your own resources – both technical and financial – to maintain your place in our economies, in a productive and profitable manner.

The reality is that, despite all the tremendous accomplishments our region has made in ICT in recent years, our infrastructure and high prices reduce accessibility making us uncompetitive in the global economy.

ICT, like electricity and other basic services, is a global public good and should be available to and accessible by all. Therefore, telecoms operators should ensure that their pricing is affordable, and ensure that they do not inadvertently crowd out consumers with exorbitant pricing, on the anvil of profitability.

ICT empowers and the empowerment of our people should be our ultimate goal.

ICT's should never be regarded as ends in themselves, but rather means to achieving our developmental objectives. Therefore, operators should see ICT's as developmental tools and do not compromise accessibility for profitability.

We must address this shortcoming swiftly if we are to improve our competitiveness and productivity.

Achieving these goals require coalitions of industry, governments, regulators, investors, our development partners and civil society.

And, most importantly, it requires collaboration between all Caribbean countries.

Hostile competition and non cooperation among competitors in the regional telecoms industry will be self defeating.

And hesitation now to grab that nettle; any delay in seizing the moment will set back our region's development and your profitability and sustainability.

Let us not mistake marking time in "charming indolence" for progress; it is only movement on the same place.

No progress is made.

While we stagnate, the world moves on.

That must not be our fate.

Our people – your consumers – want a better future.

We know that the promises and possibilities of ICT's are limitless.

Therefore we must:

Remove the digital divide;

Deliver on the promise of broadband as a high quality universal service at affordable prices;

Implement cutting edge technology to fully integrate our people in the internet of things, so that they can enjoy the use and benefits of smart ICT's, including artificial intelligence and the creation of smart cities.

As Caribbean people, let us re-imagine the possibilities. By that I mean, let us: re-imagine the opportunities for innovation and job creation for our young people; re-imagine how we deliver health care and education in our communities; re-imagine our approach to public safety and crime prevention; re-imagining the way we protect our fragile environment; re-imagine e-government

Let us re-imagine the creation of a SMART Caribbean.

Let us utilize Smart ICT's to transition the Caribbean into a global economic powerhouse.

The latter may sound ambitious, but It is not impossible.

All progress and development are inextricably linked to a progressive, cutting edge, smart ICT infrastructure and its associated tools.

The ICT infrastructure and tools for development are in your hands. It is your responsibility, our collective responsibility to enable a brighter future for our people.

Let us look beyond the differences, idealism, the ideological and philosophical rhetoric and lack of cooperation, to embrace the more pragmatic, "art of the possible," in the realization of our goals.

Remember the pragmatic wisdom of Nelson Mandela:

"It always seems impossible until it's done".

Let us work collectively and unrelentingly, to improve the living standards of our people, by providing them with full ICT access.

We can do it. Let's do it.

Finally, I wish you all a most successful conference and exhibition.

May God continue to bless you all

Thank you