

Governor's Remarks: Monday 31st May 2021

Good morning Turks and Caicos.

On this, our national day, named after our national hero, the late Honourable James Alexander George Smith McCartney, we are being asked by the organisers to talk to one of the most important challenges facing the Turks and Caicos Islands today, a challenge that impacts directly on our future. I'm grateful to them for choosing the theme: 'rebuilding the dream; a unified nation' because it gives us all much to think about.

Beyond celebrating our national day and our national hero, nations have other symbols: a national flag would be an example and a national anthem – and in TCI's case also a much loved national song. So while I will start with the flag, and then go on to reflect on our national hero, I will end with the words of Dr Reverend Howell, because just nineteen words in our national song are helpful in answering the challenge we have been set.

Today a symbol of our Territory, the Turks and Caicos Islands Flag, is flying proudly not only here but also at the main entrance to the Westminster Parliament. Even as I say that, I recognise the awkwardness, and I have thought hard about it, that a British Governor is invited to talk on a day named after your national hero whose political agenda in the 1970's was to actively set the conditions to break the link with the UK.

As a Governor you have been beyond courteous, and polite, and you have made me feel very welcome here and having noted the connection between the UK and TCI, I now stand before you – I hope – not just as a 'British Governor' but as your Governor, on our national day, but with the humility of someone who knows they are an outsider, someone who will never be a Turks and Caicos Islander, somebody who can never understand your experience in the way you can and who for some people will always represent something at best they feel uncomfortable about.

It's worth me recognising that – and saying that – yet I must also say to you that I have never felt so committed to doing the very best I can, for any group of people, as I have felt towards you since my arrival. You are a remarkable people – you inspire loyalty and TCI is a bewitching place that it is easy to fall in love with; and I have. That sentiment you inspire, which I know is not unique to me, is worth remembering when we talk of building unity. So what I now go on to say, I say not with awkwardness but with affection.

Others have eulogised the Honourable JAGS McCartney far better than I can because they knew the man – and I didn't. Instead permit me to look at the leadership qualities he demonstrated and lessons we might learn linked to the challenge we have been set. As I do that, I'll focus on three words: 'dream', 'unity' and 'nation' and perhaps ask some difficult questions.

The need for urgency. Stop dreaming, start acting:

The first big lesson is that our only national hero had moved way past 'dreaming' – he was explicit on this – to a very clear idea of what a unified nation would look like. He wasn't dreaming – he had vision and through that mission; and there's the difference. A dream is aspirational, whereas a mission gives you an achievable aiming point, a point on the horizon to march towards. Even as circumstances change you can keep a steady bead on your destination and crucially you've told others where it is, so they don't only follow you, but also play their own part in leadership.

I don't think JAGS would therefore want us to spend too much time dreaming. In his 1979 Unity speech he was explicit: "This is not an idle dream' – he said – 'it is not impossible, I see it, I feel it, it is real, indeed I am living in it already."

I do think JAGS would, as a practical politician, recognise the challenge of 'unity' in TCI now goes well beyond the complexity of 1979 when he captured the issue of disunity in his speech as one of "separation by distance and water".

Today that disunity caused by physical separation may still be the case, others can comment although I slightly rejoice in the diversity of the Islands, but there is also a far more pressing and evident separation, a separation of cultures and ethnicities not between Islands but within Islands, and within TCI, and on present projections TCI's population will reach 70,000 by 2040 – a growth of 10 times since JAGS day. All that now seriously complicates the issue.

There is though a far more optimistic reason why there is urgency and that is where we should focus. We are going to come out of this pandemic stronger than we went into it and with momentum. I am absolutely of the view, and I believe I share this with many including the present Premier and his Cabinet and the Leader of the Opposition, that the next decade is 'ours'. There is absolutely no reason why we don't arrive at 2030 as one of the most prosperous, well governed and most admired Islands in the region with a global brand that screams glamour, talent, and youthful optimism but crucially also offers rock solid stability. Unity is critical to that last word, 'stability'. As we arrive at that future what we now don't need is internal division which undermines internal stability.

Unity is not an end in itself:

Linked to that last optimistic point, if we believe there is a need to unite, it seems to me that the most important lesson JAGS might teach us, in terms of today's theme, is that 'unity' is not an end in itself: 'unity' is for a purpose, and until that purpose is defined, the route to 'unity' will remain elusive.

The second lesson JAGS can teach us is that he had gone well past 'vision' to 'purpose'. He had 'purpose' for the unity he sought. He could explain to others – in simple and clear language – why he wanted to reach the aiming

point on the horizon, with them alongside him. His purpose, as others have said, was self-determination.

And it would seem to me he went further still. The third lesson is that it wasn't 'just' about building the consensus he needed, that for him self-determination was the right course of action, no, it was not only the action but also the consequences of that action that he was building resilience for. It was a pragmatic realisation that for an independent small Island state to prosper, in an extremely competitive world, it could only succeed if its population was united rather than divided; otherwise it would be at the mercy of much larger outside International and commercial interests.

It is for you, the people of TCI, to set the purpose. Given this is the Honourable JAGS McCartney day many minds in the audience will, I accept, view independence as the long-term purpose for unity as JAGS did. Given the UK unequivocally supports the right to self-determination, the UK and I remain neutral on this point wishing to simply support any future decision the people of TCI make on this most important issue. But it would seem to me that a crucial first purpose for all – and certainly for those who hold that vision – has to be to deliver the type of settled society these Islands need, to truly prosper in the way I described earlier.

What type of nation do we need?

Enough for the moment on 'unity', let's now turn to that difficult word 'nation'. Those listening may have given it more thought than I, but I do not know, in what terms that word is being used here today.

The idea of 'nation' is complicated. We get the word 'nation' from the same Latin root as we get the word 'nativity'. It talks to birth, and through that to someone's place of birth. Traditionally the word nation talks to a distinct group, a group bounded together by a common language, a common ethnicity, a common history, a common story. Before the people of the world started to move in an ever increasing way, the place where you were born generally sat very comfortably within this definition.

There is therefore an elegance, because of the definition I describe, drawing the boundaries of 'the nation' roughly as JAGS would have recognised it in 1979; tightly around those who are Turks and Caicos Islanders. Of course that isn't a strictly homogeneous group, some TCI Islanders have not lived here for generations, they might for example have gained that status through marriage – indeed JAGS father, a Jamaican, was just such a person. Whatever, while that traditional definition might indeed unify a 'nation' within TCI, it would not unify the Territory of TCI as a 'nation'. That's important to recognise. The question to ask is, does that matter? Some would say it doesn't.

It might be helpful to just mention where the word 'nation' is not used. We don't use the word 'nation' to describe the United States of America – yet those who live there have a very clear idea of who they are and they describe themselves proudly as Americans. Americans have traditionally unified not as a homogenous ethnic group but around big ideas, indeed it's a country founded

on an idea. They built 'unity' around purpose.

There are though 'nations' that reside in America. The Native American nation being the best known but there was a fascinating book published last year describing the 'eleven nations of America'. The thesis may or may not be right but having visited every State in the 'Lower 48' I can attest that there is not one homogeneous culture that embraces all of America.

Likewise, the United Kingdom isn't a 'Nation', it is a 'Nation State'. The UK is made up of four 'nations': England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It's why first generation immigrants to the United Kingdom often (but not always) feel more comfortable describing themselves as British rather than, say, English. I raise all this to say that both the US and UK are successful countries that can accommodate different 'nations', although not always comfortably – and at present with some difficulty.

The wider lesson here is if the idea of a 'nation' is built around a very tightly defined ethnicity, story and culture, then we can expect, like in the US and UK, other groups to bond around their culture, and their ethnicity, and for micro-nations to exist within TCI. If they are not allowed inside the tent that we call 'the TCI nation', they will build their own 'tent'. Is that what we want for our long term future?

Perhaps the definition in TCI of who belongs to our 'nation' stretches further than the traditional definition to include those with other legal status that demonstrate they have a long term personal investment in these Islands future. This is then a 'nation' that is intentionally built to look to its future, as well as celebrate its past'. It's for you to decide – not me – how many metaphorical colours you want in your version of a more rainbow nation, if you want it at all – and I know some do not. But whatever you decide, a nation doesn't just 'happen' it requires serious intentional work and powerful engaged leadership if we are to 'nation-build'.

The crux of the challenge:

Which brings me back to my earlier point. It seems to me the only route through this conundrum, and again I think this is where learning from JAGS leads us, is the overwhelming requirement to have a 'purpose' for the unity you seek, and then that purpose leading you to the decision about what type of nation you need to build.

I stand before you therefore without the answers to these incredibly tough questions – not least because they are not mine to answer, they are yours. That's where great national leaders such as JAGS come in – that's where those who call TCI home have to become engaged. I do know, as I think JAGS knew, that these are foundational questions that must be answered before real progress can be made. Before we can settle on the 'nation' we want, we need to answer the question 'why' we want it. I have very little doubt that the unity to generate it will then come, but we must be honest that different levels of inclusion in 'our nation' will march us towards different long term outcomes and crucially different levels of stability and security.

This is a challenge not just for the present leaders – which I define in the broadest sense – of the Turks and Caicos Islands – although I do believe, through my many conversations with him, that we are fortunate that the Premier is a man of vision and has great ambition, sustainable ambition, for these Islands.

But it is also a conversation that needs to be had by the many, not just the few. Indeed those under 40 have a greater stake in this debate than any – it is their future we are talking about – and it is inspirational that JAGS achieved all that he did in his 30's.

Bearing in mind this conversation in the 1970's started within a social club, dominated by youth, much now rests on the success, clarity and inclusivity of this conversation that can be conducted anywhere and everywhere. I hope the challenge we have been set today is, for instance, not just taken up in the bar-room but also the classroom.

The answer may be in the national song:

Crucially, what I have said today is hardly a new idea: JAGS got it, as did the Reverend Howell, who couldn't really have put it any better in terms of the lyrics he wrote to our national song, that all our children learn, and which Tess proudly led us in today:

“Our people forged and blend with multiplicity of race and kind and creed and tongue, united by our goals”.

‘United by our goals’. So goes our national song...

I'll therefore leave the last word to Reverend Howell – and the children who sing with such passion – the answer to the challenge the organisers set us, is that there is no need to rebuild a 'dream', the dream, and the answer to the dream, are already captured in those nineteen words of our national song: we – by which I mean the people of TCI – now just need to define the goals and a people, the amazing people of these Islands will be forged around it.

And so may God Bless the Turks and Caicos Islands, may God bless all who celebrate our national day near or far, and may God bless not the dream – but the realisable ambition – of a unified Turks and Caicos Islands nation.