

ADDRESS
BY
THE HON. PERRY G. CHRISTIE
PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF FINANCE
COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

AT THE
COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY
PALM BEACH ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY
ON
SATURDAY, MAY 3RD 2003
AT
2:00 p.m.

WEST PALM BEACH
FLORIDA

SALUTATION:

President Mahanes

Chairman & Members of The Trustee Board

Members of the Administration, Faculty and Staff

Distinguished Platform Guests

Members of the Class of 2003

Parents and Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Afternoon

First of all, as you would have learned from my introduction, I was trained in London therefore I am still familiarizing myself with certain customs in American higher education.

For instance, I understand that there are four types of graduates this afternoon.

1. Those who are graduating summa cum laude
2. Those who are graduating magna cum laude
3. Those who are graduating cum laude, and
4. Those who are graduating thank you laude.

This is a commencement, not a completion exercise, therefore, my first point this afternoon is directed at those who are in that fourth group; those who are in the majority; those graduating thank - you laude. You could be an average student in college yet become a summa cum laude achiever in life. Conversely, you could graduate with a 4.0 in college yet fail in the game of life. I too admire brilliance but the corridor of success is made up mostly of people with average abilities but above average goals; who dared to dream big dreams, who dared to see the big picture and who dared to think out of the box.

In my own case, I was expelled from junior high school; they said I couldn't learn; that I should pursue a trade or drive a taxi. But because I had big dreams, I went on to obtain an honours law degree; headed the largest black law firm in The Bahamas, won six consecutive elections and I stand here today as Prime Minister.

And so while what you have done in the past is important, remember, this is commencement. It's what you do from this point on that will determine whether or not you, and those around you, benefit from what we have come to know as higher education.

Mr. President, graduates, I bring you greetings from The Commonwealth of The Bahamas, your nearest offshore destination to the south.

We are a country of 300,000 people who occupy 700 islands, reefs and cays amidst 100,000 miles of water. We are among the world's oldest democracies and we have been, and are, one of the United States' most steadfast friends.

Not only are we close to the United States geographically, you are our primary trading partner; you are our principle source of tourism; you are our preferred destination for vacation and higher education and it is with the United States that more than a dozen, brave young Bahamians stand in the Middle East today as members of the Air Force, Marine Corps, the Army and the Navy.

I am advised that there was a graduation ceremony earlier today for younger graduates, the typical 20-23 year olds. Perhaps it is fortuitous that I am not addressing them but you instead. If I were addressing them, my message would have taken fewer than ten seconds. And that message would simply be this: "The elevator to success is not working, you're gonna have to take the stairs." That would have been my message to them. With that I would have taken my seat. Regrettably, you are not so fortunate.

When I received President Mahanes' kind invitation and noted that I would be addressing a graduating class comprised mostly of working adults, I began to wonder what might I say that would stimulate your minds and motivate your souls.

I wondered what I might say to graduates most of whom are poised to lead a society and a world that are becoming more and more impersonal, a society and a world in which the future is being shaped daily by the World Wide Web and the Internet.

I wondered what might I say to graduates who live in a society that leads the world in bridging the Digital Divide, a society in which most citizens can now reach across a computer keyboard and surf new vistas of communication, commerce and even companionship.

I needn't tell you that because of the Internet, the possibilities for economic reforms, corporate-based education and the combining of cultures and societies have never been greater.

Yes, I wondered what I might say to graduates who are part of a new knowledge-based, global economy, a society that sees value in research and development, education and skills development through life-long learning.

As I contemplated what I might say to you, it occurred to me that despite the great and noble achievements of your country, despite the leading role that America plays around the world in education, only ten percent of the American population believe that the reason to attend school is "to acquire knowledge." Indeed, according to a 1994 Gallop Poll, Americans believe that the purpose of education is as follows:

- To get a better job 42%
- To develop an understanding of culture 1%
- To develop critical thinking skills 1%
- To learn basis skills 3%

And so, my second point this afternoon is that I trust that you are departing from this place not just with a credential, but with real added knowledge that you could apply to make yourself a more productive worker, a more creative entrepreneur, a better problem solver, a more critical thinker, a more compassionate fellow traveller, a more informed citizen of the world community, and a more fully functioning human being.

If the central purpose of your education is simply to land a job or obtain a better job, then I suggest that you haven't yet discovered your nobler calling nor your higher purpose. Without a nobler calling or a higher purpose, what good is higher education?

In his book "The Credential Society: A Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification" Randall Collins makes the point that the United States has become a Credentialized Society in which a degree or certificate has

become necessary to perform all but the most menial of tasks. Frankly, we are going down that same road in The Bahamas and I dare say around the world.

While the mere acquisition of a credential may open the doors to employment and promotions, it does not necessarily cause the recipient to perform better on the job. And so I ask you this afternoon why are you here? How did you get here? What brings you to this point in time?

Are you here simply because you have satisfied the degree requirements? Are you here simply because you figured that a degree is a rite of passage to a better job with a higher salary? Or are you here because you have new-found knowledge; because you can now apply that knowledge to remove old challenges?

For instance, as a result of your education are you now more or less tolerant of people who are not credentialed? Are you more or less tolerant of people of different races, different places of origin, different abilities and different points of view? Beyond placing you in a position to obtain a promotion and perhaps a higher salary, what has higher education done for you?

Let me repeat for emphasis: Point number one: just because you're average in college, doesn't mean you must be average in your outlook and in your achievements. Point number two: while obtaining a job is important, the greater purpose of education should be to allow you to see the big picture; to think out of the box; to apply creativity, imagination and scholarship to problem solving.

My third point this afternoon is that I trust that as a result of your education, you are now not just more competent, but more flexible. Indeed, business bankruptcies, corporate layoffs and a major shift in the workplace have made it so that the average person over age twenty-five now stays on the same job

for no longer than five years. Switching careers is now much easier and far more necessary than it used to be. Indeed, the days of retiring with a Rolex Watch after 40 years on the same job, are gone - never to return.

This explains why from 1987 to 1999 the number of graduate students forty years old and above increased by fifty six percent. This point will become even more important as we inch closer towards the realities of an FTAA and a WTO existence.

And so the older we grow, the more flexible we must become. Education for today's adult is a never-ending journey, it is not a destination. That is why I remind you again, today represents a commencement not a conclusion.

Fourthly, and finally, let me say that your new credential isn't worth very much if along the way you have not learnt that the true test of a learned person is not how often he walks with the high and the mighty but how often he pauses to assist those whom the Good Book calls "the least of these."

Yes, this wonderful country leads the world in military might and in democratic rights; in economic strength and in scientific advances. Yet according to the Department of Education's National Adult Literacy Survey, of the 191 million American citizens over age sixteen, 44 million of them (or 23 percent) rank at the lowest literacy level. What is more, fewer than ten percent of adults who could benefit from literacy programmes are currently being served. We have a similar challenge in The Bahamas and I have resolved as Prime Minister to fix that.

Don't tell me what the Federal Government will do about this; not what the State of Florida will do about this; not even what Palm Beach Atlantic University plans to do about streams of illiteracy in an ocean of brilliance. What are you prepared to do to curtail illiteracy?

Those of you who are leaving today with degrees in education would be familiar with a 1995 study by the National Education Goals Panel that showed American students scoring below the international average.

Among 21 countries studied, the United States out-performed only three. Does that concern you? Does that challenge you?

Or are you still thinking within the box, focusing on the small picture? Bill Gates thought outside of the box and the rest is history. Why can't you? In my view, thinking outside of the box is no longer optional. It has become an international imperative.

There are critical challenges that will not yield to worn out slogans and outlined approaches. Bringing creative energy to the table is your new mandate.

You would be aware, no doubt, that according to the US Bureau of the Census' 1999 Population survey, there was a 8.5 percent drop out rate among white high school graduates, a 19 percent drop out rate among African-Americans and a 29 percent drop out rate among Hispanics.

I ask again, what are you prepared to do about this? Not the Federal Government, not the State of Florida; not even Palm Beach Atlantic University. What are you prepared to do to arrest this phenomenon. What new approaches do you plan to employ to ameliorate age-old problems that beckon and bedevil us all?

As for high school dropouts, this is most important not only from the stand point of social policy but you should make it a personal priority, since I am told that high school dropouts tend to earn less and hence pay less taxes; as a general rule they increase the demand for social services; and generally, they have poorer health.

And so I ask again - for the fourth time what are you prepared to do?

What are you prepared to do about the fact that this country, blessed by the Almighty as it is, has roughly five percent of the world's population but consumes over 85 percent of the world's narcotics. The Federal Government is doing all that it can, so is the State of Florida. Given the

spiritual emphasis at this fine institution it is clear that it has a zero-tolerance position against illegal drugs.

My question to you is, what are you prepared to do to reduce the scourge of drugs that assault our value system, destroy our families and shatter too many dreams?

Some of you may say if somehow we rid ourselves of South America and a few Caribbean countries - including The Bahamas - you would solve the drug problem.

Well, you tell me, which comes first, the chicken or the egg? You tell me, which comes first the supply or the demand? If there was no demand there wouldn't be the supply. But I submit to you that if there is no supply there will still be the demand. That is why the Designer Drug industry is flourishing. And so what are you going to do about this imposing challenge?

I am not a mind reader but I can imagine what some of you are saying. "What difference can I make; I am only one person!" The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King used to say "There's nothing more powerful than a mind that's made up." Remember Rosa Parks; remember Joan of Arc; remember Naomi; remember Lech Walesa; remember Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy; remember Mother Theresa and Eleanor Roosevelt; remember Florence Nightingale and Nelson Mandela. As individuals, they tossed a stone for change into a vast ocean of doubt and despair and from that stone emerged a thousand ripples of progress and a thousand rays of light.

Rev. Jesse Jackson puts it this way, "We can't all be famous, but we can all be great because we can all serve." Service, my dear friends, is the true measure of an educated person. Not how much you earn, but how much you give; not how much you learn but how much you impart.

A Greek Philosopher, speaking on an occasion quite similar to this, told graduates "You have your brush and your colours. Now paint your paradise and go in it."

What portrait will you paint? One of growing homelessness or one of burgeoning opulence? One of "I am my brother's keeper" or one of "God bless the child who's got his own;" one of personal integrity no matter the cost, or one of fame and fortune at all cost; one of God and family, or one of me, myself and I? What portrait will you paint?

Why are you here? What are you prepared to do? A Chinese essayist once said that the essence of life is to matter, to have it make a difference that you passed this way. Other than to your family, do you matter? Is your neighbourhood, your city, your country, indeed the world better off because you are passing this way?

Isn't it strange that prophets and kings
And the clowns that play in circus rings
And common people like you and me
Are builders for eternity

For to each is given a set of tools
A shapeless piece of clay and a book of rules
And each must work before life has flown
To make that clay a stumbling block or a stepping stone
Now isn't that strange...

Thank you very much.