

CLOSING CEREMONY

CONSULAR AFFAIRS MODULE:

“ADVANCES IN CONSULAR AFFAIRS IN A MODERN DIPLOMATIC MISSION”:

A Caribbean Perspective

At the outset, I wish to apologise to all in attendance for any shortcomings in the tone of my delivery. As I would have mentioned yesterday during the roundtable discussion, I was experiencing the onset of a flu-like condition which affected my ability to speak without some degree of difficulty. Overnight the condition descended upon me like a ton of bricks making it painful to cough or even swallow which are the most immediate urges, but I thought that I should soldier on given the lateness of the hour and the centrality of this intervention to the Closing Ceremony.

During the Capstone event yesterday, participants would have been exposed to some of the practical issues in the delivery of consular services within the context of a diplomatic or consular mission, which would have built upon the various elements of the module, expertly tailored by the Facilitators Ms Gail Guy and Dr Natalie Dietrich-Jones, to be as comprehensive as possible without being overwhelming, as succinct as possible without overlooking the essential elements that contribute to an effective understanding of what in practice can be a challengingly complex area. My sincere congratulations go out to the said Facilitators.

The thrust of my intervention today however seeks to address some of the “softer” issues, a misnomer in my view, those issues related to “process” which are equally important to grasp if our efforts are to yield the desired results. Some of the new consular challenges accurately identified in the overview were such

issues as responses to migration, human trafficking, treatment of children and minors, drug trafficking, trafficking in arms and ammunitions, money laundering among others, that impose new responsibilities and barriers to be surmounted in achieving the goals of the consular function. There are several points to note at this juncture with respect to these emerging issues.

Firstly, the consular experience is neither identical nor even similar across governments' diplomatic and consulates abroad and differ for the most part in the access to resources which are made available for the discharge of that function. A consular jurisdiction where there is a high concentration of the sending state's nationals, would likely feature highly in the setting of government's priorities. Over time, the logic of government policy dictates that resources will be expended where they will yield the greatest impact, which has led to perceived politicisation among missions. Consular officers should remain mindful that their obligation is a national and not a partisan one. While every attempt should be made to enhance diaspora relations, the impact of ICTs and new media has created a situation whereby citizens in the diaspora seek to develop mediums for advancing vested interests. Consular officers should remain vigilant.

Secondly, in most Caribbean government administrations, responsibility for those issues identified as emerging issues would have, logically in most instances, been farmed out to the State's law enforcement and surveillance and control agencies, given the national and international security linkages at play. At smaller missions, that expanded responsibility remains intact without the necessary institutional support. Additionally, the "silo" approach to the flow of information among these agencies and other related government offices, driven

no doubt by sensitivity to confidentiality related issues, stands in the way of maximising the benefits of relevant synergies.

The recognition of this dysfunction in the information flows no doubt lies behind the identification in the module overview of the “challenge to the consular officer/agent of not merely understanding the framework within which he/she must operate, but also the necessity of being abreast of developments affecting the field of operations globally and in the area of jurisdiction so as to make the required adjustments in functional approaches that facilitate achievement of favourable outcomes . It has been my experience that the lack of structured support from Headquarters poses as much of a challenge, and in some cases, even more than those presented in the consular jurisdiction by the practices of the relevant authorities in the receiving state.

The consular function is central to Government’s responsibility for seeing after the interests of its nationals, and the focus of government in my experience has stepped beyond the provision of routine consular services to resident nationals and emergency consular services to transient nationals, into the realm of emergency services for all nationals. This development has posed problems in the management of the expectations of affected nationals, particularly in the context of shrinking resources.

I would have shared some of my thoughts cursorily on some of the more poignant issues yesterday during the capstone event. I have skirted some of the more delicate issues in the thoughts articulated above, and I feel constrained by the present format and my own physical challenges to elaborate on what is an extensive and complex subject area. It would be remiss of me however, if I didn’t share with you some of the insights gleaned from having served in an exceedingly difficult consular jurisdiction, for a long period of time, much of it

alone as chief cook and bottlewasher so to speak. These insights I think have influenced my formation as a consular officer over the course of my career, and revolve around the experience of solitude which facilitates reflection, service to fellow man which brings its own reward, the nature of self-validation in your professional endeavours all of which I have encapsulated into the following bullet points:

- Service to your fellow man ranks among the highest of callings.
- Solitude is underrated. Embrace it and use it wisely.
- In discharging your consular responsibility, in the absence or a scarcity of resources, give of yourself. It has more value than you can imagine. The beneficiary will know.
- You get out of your assignment what you bring to it.
- Let not the locus of validation be external to self, look within.
- Be flexible and facilitative in your approach. Our institutional architecture and regulatory framework have many shortcomings. We don't necessarily have to look to them for absolute truth.

The consular function is not, as many people think, the drab flip side of the diplomatic function. It only appears that way to those who do not know better. It can be fulfilling beyond all expectation.