



GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO  
MINISTRY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

# *Annual Christmas Dinner*

**PENAL/DEBE CHAMBER OF  
COMMERCE**

.....

FEATURE ADDRESS

**SENATOR THE HONOURABLE PAULA GOPEE-SCOON  
MINISTER OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY**

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11 DECEMBER 2015  
SOUTHERN ACADEMY FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

A pleasant good evening.

Let me first extend a heartfelt thank you to the Penal/Debe Chamber of Commerce for inviting me to speak with you at your 13th Annual Christmas Dinner. I commend the Chamber for its social, economic and political contributions to their communities and the nation at large, and congratulate this year's awardees for their invaluable roles in promoting, developing and inspiring the people and places around them.

Small and mediums enterprises (SMEs) like you, contribute approximately 30% to GDP and employ more than 200,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago<sup>1</sup>. You may be small but your numbers, diversity and dynamism make you an unequalled social and economic force. You are the drivers of growth and sustainable development in our country and your role cannot be diminished.

While the Penal/Debe district has indirectly benefitted as a result of the rich oil and gas fields found in the Southern region, it is also developed as an economic hub unto itself, spurring numerous businesses, attracting families and brimming with energy and confidence. While "Doubles by Debe Junction" quickly comes to mind, those who appreciate its humble beginnings, appreciate how far this region has come. If there is anything you need, and don't need, I am sure you can find it on SS Erin Road!

At this critical time, where the price of oil is hovering around US\$40 per barrel<sup>2</sup>, entrepreneurship is especially important to becoming globally competitive. A recession is not a time to complain about the past, but a time to think and act with resolve. I want to reassure you that this Administration is actively working to guarantee economic stability, create growth and jobs, to restore confidence in our economy and country. But extraordinary times also call for extraordinary measures. The Government, therefore, has unequivocally and unabashedly slashed unnecessary expenditures by all Ministries and public Agencies. Our decision to raise the debt ceiling to access additional funding was a difficult one, but necessary in light of constantly dwindling revenues and reserves. Remember, despite our economic state, salaries must be paid, contractual obligations must be met, infrastructure must be developed and repaired, and government services must be made available to the public and business community. Of course, all this will be done with prudence, an emphasis on value for money and a rejection of waste and frivolity. Our action to revert to the former system of foreign exchange and inject half a billions US dollars into the economy to meet the demand is a clear example that we mean business.

For far too long we have talked about diversification; however, after several decades, there is still much to do and do differently. The lines of communication between government and the private sector have traditionally been one-directional and weak at best. Yes, it is the responsibility of government to develop policies, but government requires input from the business community to identify specific challenges and opportunities to guide policies and promote initiatives that benefit producers and consumers alike. A recent stakeholder forum which brought together the Ministry of Trade and Industry and various Chambers and Business Associations, exemplifies the Government's intentions to ensure that everyone is on board in shaping our future.

In an effort to streamline and make transparent the decision-making process, the Government has established an Economic Development Advisory Board, which will advise on economic policy and

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<sup>1</sup>Daily Express, "SME Growth and National Development"; Feb 11, 2014

<sup>2</sup>Nasdaq.com

develop a strategy for reducing our dependence on oil and gas. Under its purview is a Standing Committee on the Development and Growth of the Non-Energy Sector, which will oversee the implementation of policies and initiatives developed by the Advisory Board.

While the Penal/Debe region has become a centre of activities around retail goods, the automotive industry, and other sectors, I urge the young graduates and entrepreneurs to consider these areas for new experiences and opportunities. The areas the Ministry intends to emphasize for investment are : Tourism, Agriculture and Agro-processing, Fish and Fish-processing, Maritime Services, Aviation Services, Financial Services, Information and Communication Technologies and Creative Industries, all of which we believe, have the potential to penetrate international markets.

By partnering with the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Service Industries (TTCSI), the Ministry's efforts in Maritime Services will focus on ship building, ship repair, dry docking and yachting services, while in the Creative Industries, they will be focused on film, fashion and music. To boost the local film industry we have employed the Production Expenditure Rebate Programme which provides cash rebates up to 35% on local expenditure and an additional 20% on expenditure incurred for local labour. Despite this emphasis, our Ministry will not overlook any opportunity for trade, investment and business in other areas and sectors, in any country across the globe.

In addition to domestic expansion, the goods and services produced locally need to find their way onto the shelves, and into the factories and boardrooms across the globe. The Ministry has worked to develop bilateral agreements with Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala, and through our membership with CARICOM, arrangements with Venezuela, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and Cuba. And although most of us know about the US, Canadian and European markets, how many have actually taken sought to expand their trading relationships in these countries and regions? The Ministry has the resources and institutions—exporTT and invesTT—that can provide you with information to strategically calculate the risks and therefore improve your chances of successfully entering these markets, while the Export-Import (EXIM) Bank is there to provide you with financing.

The opportunities are many; you simply have to look for them. Compete Caribbean, a private sector development programs that is jointly funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the United Kingdom Department for international Development (DFID) and the Government of Canada, provides technical assistance grants and investment funding to support small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) in fifteen Caribbean counties. Its Enterprise Innovation Challenge Fund offers funding up to US\$500,000 to support projects that are risky, but also innovative. The Caribbean Export Development Agency also offers financial assistance through its Direct Assistance Grant Scheme, where reimbursements up to €30,000 are made to businesses with the potential to export their products and services. The Ministry has close relationships with these and many other Agencies where funding is available. Come see us to understand the wide range of opportunities.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry is also spearheading efforts to improve the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as to reduce the bureaucracy in executing several government services. The Ministry's online platform, TTBizLink, currently facilitates collaboration among 24 Government agencies across eight Ministries, through which companies can apply for a variety of services including import licenses, export licenses and certificates of origin. In conjunction with the IDB, we intend to expand and improve the services offered by TTBizLink in an effort to optimize and simplify foreign trade and business processes required by key government agencies, reduce time and transaction costs for foreign

trade and business processes and improve the interoperability between national government institutions and our international trading partners.

Businesses need space and clustering works to lower the cost of doing business. The Government, therefore, has prioritized the development of Industrial Parks and Special Economic Zones across Trinidad and Tobago, with Point Fortin Business Park being the first of many. This Park will benefit the entire South-western peninsula and estimated to create almost 250 permanent jobs. These Parks and Zones will not be located randomly, but strategically placed to maximize the profits earned by the firms that reside within, as well as to provide much needed jobs and income to those in the host communities.

Before I conclude, I encourage you take this opportunity to meet someone new, and share your experiences, ideas and concerns with him or her. In times like these, you are our greatest hope. More than ever, the country needs your entrepreneurial spirit and courage—whether you realize it or not.

Richard Branson, the self-made multi-billionaire and head of Virgin Group, dropped out of school at 16 and started a student magazine. He simply wanted to be an editor or a journalist and was never interested in being a business-owner. He quickly realized, however, that in order to keep the magazine going he had to become an entrepreneur. He had to become innovative. He had to take risk and challenge himself to maintain the things he wanted most. He is now worth over US\$2 billion. While we all may not have the same dreams and aspirations, we can all work to create something of our own, something that will provide new opportunities, spur novel ideas, improve our well-being and overall quality of life. Think about what you can do for yourself, your community and your country. We have done it before, and we can do it again.

As I close, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you and your family warm holiday greetings and all the best for a bright and prosperous 2016.

I thank you.

## NOTES

In preparing for the Feature Address for the Penal/Debe Chamber's Annual Christmas Dinner, the Chamber was contacted for information. They indicated the following:

- They are pro South Campus UWI.

- They are pro highway to Point Fortin.
- The Chamber is in the process of lobbying for a Sporting complex and Fire Station in Penal.
- The Chamber is in the process of lobbying for an area of space in Debe for a light manufacturing estate. This was initiated about 20 years ago and stakeholders were shown the parcels of land which they would receive. However, this has not materialized and the proper development of manufacturing was not facilitated. This is still necessary, especially given the lower prices of oil and gas and the current financial state of our economy. Penal/Debe can generate more jobs in the short term and create sustainable jobs in the long term. Manufacturing can contribute to decreasing the import bill and fulfilling local demands. This would also mean that there would be a lower burden on the Central Bank for foreign exchange. In this regard, the Chamber specifically requested assistance for this venture. The Piarco Aeropark has zones earmarked for:
  - a free trade zone;
  - a four star airport hotel and conference center;
  - retail shopping;
  - indoor entertainment and outdoor recreation;
  - offices;
  - warehousing;
  - manufacturing and
  - a Maintenance Repair and Overhaul Facility (MRO).

## CONCLUSION

Ladies and Gentlemen, Confidence and the willingness to take risk go hand in hand. Needless to say, our Government will provide the needed support.

We are prepared to offer the appropriate incentives and assistance, however, we expect the private sector to also do its part.

In this regard, you may find it instructive that the term Public Private Partnership (PPP) was mentioned more than eight times by the Honourable Minister of Finance.

In addition, the allocation of TT\$20 Million to build the technical capacity of the Government in the area of PPP also underscores the Government's seriousness in working with the Private Sector to drive new investment into the economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen, despite the challenges, Trinidad and Tobago still has numerous strengths:

- political stability;
- abundant natural resources;
- positive human development indicators (education, lifespan, etc.);
- relatively good infrastructure; and
- an already established manufacturing and energy sectors.

We have made the necessary political change, economic change is now afoot.

Let us dialogue in reshaping and remaking our economy and building a bright future for our great country. We need to build a shared vision, but before that let us collaborate extensively; all stakeholders

share your plans with us, written or orally. Help us to create the right initiatives.

We commit to creating a business friendly environment; partner with us to build sustainable economic growth and social progress of all our People.

Bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh. We are one, in this together.

I thank you!