

Speech by Justice Melville Baird

Fatima College

June 16, 2018

To be the recipient of encomiums, laudations and recognition from you, my college friends, my classmates, my peers, for my judicial career and my present appointment as Chairman of the Integrity Commission is an experience that is at once, humbling and exhilarating. And when you went further and arranged for a Mass to be said; a Mass of thanksgiving to the Lord for his bounteous liberality to me in my judicial career and of supplication, asking the Lord to protect, assist and guide me as I now discharge the challenging duties of this new job; and when that Mass was said by the Principal of our college, in the college chapel whereas college boys we attended services and where I was a young Mass server, then that experience ascends from its terrestrial plane into the realm of the spiritual.

As I look around the room and see familiar faces I am transported back in time to the days when we played football (not soccer) and cricket on the college grounds; when we cheered ourselves hoarse in the grand stand for the Fatima team at the Intercol Games; when, as we were cycling to college and we felt the slightest drizzle of rain, we immediately stopped and sheltered the drizzle because we did not want to catch our death of cold. When we did all these things together as college boys, I could not have imagined in a month of Sundays, that today I would be standing here the focus of the appreciation, the object of the pride, of these very students with whom I played games on the college grounds, cheered at Intercol and cycled to college. This is without question a moment of great emotion and intensity for me. It is no mean thing to be honoured by one's peers.

I thank you for your devotion, your loyalty, your love. And in a very special way I thank you for the Mass because –and I say this quite candidly- that I would not be able to do this job without the help of the Lord. I simply would not be able to function in this position without his assistance.

When I was appointed Chief Magistrate I thought the appointment was daunting; when I was appointed High Court Judge I thought that that appointment was even

more daunting; and when I was appointed International Judge I considered that daunting could go no further. When I was appointed Chairman of the Integrity Commission however the daunting there was on steroids.

I assumed duties as Chairman of the Integrity Commission in January of this year; so I am now six months on the job. And after six months I am still reeling at the number of persons in public life who fail, and in some cases fail consistently, to file their declarations of income, assets and liabilities. A sinister feature of this failure and what I find to be surpassingly disconcerting is the fact that several of these delinquent declarants are persons in high office.

Let me say this straightway that a great number of persons in high office dutifully file their declarations. They must be applauded for their civic mindedness, their deep sense of duty, their profound sense of country.

Far too many persons in public life however, are not filing their declarations and persons in high office make up a substantial proportion of those delinquent declarants- notwithstanding the high number of such persons who responsibly file their annual declarations.

When persons in high office flagrantly break the law, then persons in office not that high would feel emboldened and indeed justified, also to break the law. There is nothing so easy to follow as a bad example. Their attitude could very well be: "if the priest could play who is we?" – a prescription for chaos on an epic scale.

This state of affairs cannot be good for our society and it is sending a pernicious message to our young people. It is an unrelieved calamity and it must be addressed.

I returned a short while ago from a conference of the Commonwealth Caribbean Association of Integrity Commissions and Anti-Corruption Bodies held in the Turks and Caicos Islands. There I marvelled when on speaking with an official of the Integrity Commission of the Turks and Caicos Islands we were informed that for the current statutory period 99% of persons who were under an obligation to file their declaration had done so. I thought of Trinidad and Tobago and quietly asked

myself, if the Turks and Caicos Islands can do it why can Trinidad and Tobago not do it? What is the problem?

What I consider to be lacerating irony is the fact that several Caribbean Commonwealth countries, when they were setting up their own Integrity Commissions came to Trinidad and Tobago for advice and guidance because our Integrity Commission was already up and running. And we gladly gave them that advice and guidance. And today most of those countries are paragons of compliance and are streets ahead of us in the observance of this legal requirement. Why can we not lead in this event as we lead in others? We can do better. We must do better.

I urge all those in public life therefore, across the board, to do the right thing, observe the law of the land and avoid any unpleasantness lower down the road.

I hope you can apprehend when I say I need Providential help, because what I have touched on ever so briefly here today is but a fraction of the challenges that confront me in this job.

Again my friends, my classmates, my peers I thank you all very much indeed for this extraordinary and magnanimous gesture. And in particular I offer heartfelt thanks to Father Augustine for consenting to be the Celebrant at Mass and for making the facilities at the college available to us for this very delightful event. I thank you all.