Twenty-seven years after its creation, the Caribbean Community, consisting of fifteen states stretching from the Bahamas in the north to Suriname in South America, presents a picture of a relatively mature and stable regional organisation characterised by successful programmes of functional cooperation, important formal links with the major global powers, trade and other partnerships with the principal states of the Caribbean Basin, and a demonstrated capacity to withstand the vicissitudes of its evolution. And even though it has been criticised for a number of deficiencies, as have the European Union and other economic groupings, the fact remains that it has survived and can be said to have made significant contributions in regional and international affairs.

Yet at one crucial moment it was not expected to survive. Overwhelmed by the world economic crisis of the 1970s, unsettled by ideological divisions, weakened by internal differences, the Caribbean Community seemed destined for failure. That it did resolve these problems is not only testimony to the power of the integration idea among the peoples and the Governments of the region, but also to its ability to fashion its own instruments for survival and success. This survival and success must also be attributed to a body of ideas and analyses which have emerged out of the various heads of government conferences in the 1980s and the studies and commissions authorised
and brought into being by them. There is a distinct ideology of survival encapsulated in the ideas which have emerged from these studies and declarations.

Having overcome the crisis of the 1970s and the challenges of the 1980s, CARICOM is in a position, indeed has the capacity, to re-position itself to face the challenges of the new century and take advantage of the opportunities it will offer. The changing nature of the integration movement will make this a distinct possibility. The Caribbean Community has been transformed from an economic grouping concerned with the promotion of economic self-reliance in relation to the rest of the world, to one in which the movement of labour and capital will be a notable feature. Measures to enhance its negotiating capacity and its capacity to harness the benefits of globalisation have also been taken.

The Caribbean has every right to face the future with confidence. For this region of only six million people has demonstrated its ability to compete at the level of ideas in global society. Small as it is, it has produced two Nobel Prize-winners, outstanding thinkers, writers and creative artists, and the anthem of the millennium was composed by one of its sons. These are significant achievements. These historical, spiritual and cultural strengths will ensure that the success of the movement towards unity is assured. The Caribbean Community also has a lesson to teach the world as far as cultural dynamism and racial harmony are concerned. This has been noted by Gordon Lewis in his seminal work, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought*:

... it (the Caribbean) possesses features that might well make it the envy of so-called more advanced societies. Its various groups, whether identified in racial, ethnic, or religious definitional terms, live, if not in complete harmony, at least in a peaceful coexistence that other Third World areas ravaged by communalism and tribalism might envy. Its peoples and cultures, indeed, being so much a rich mixture of America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, have shaped out of their experience some of the leading ideas of the modern world especially relevant to Third World problems: negritude, black power, black nationalism, Creole Marxism, Cuban socialism, and the rest. Indeed, relative to its size, the region has produced a disproportionate number of artists, thinkers, and scholar-politicians, many of them with an international fame ... and many of them, in addition, combining political leadership and intellectual culture in a way that has almost disappeared in the political life of countries like Britain and the United States. All of these things ... are the elements of the promise of Caribbean life. The future of the Caribbean lies within the capacity and the willingness of those elements to fulfil and indeed enlarge that promise.²

More than fifty years ago in September 1947, a generation of West Indian leaders met in Montego Bay to chart a future for this region in the postwar
era. They met under the banner 'The Closer Association of the British West Indian Colonies', a clear indication that it was recognised that Caribbean unity was essential to the progress of the region. The meeting was the culmination of a relatively long process in the search for integration. It laid the foundation for the creation of the West Indies Federation and was the result of the recognition that a politically and economically unified Caribbean would not only foster and promote economic development but, more importantly, would be a barrier to the twin evils of particularism and fragmentation. Important spiritual as well as political milestones were laid on the road to Montego Bay.

But the impetus towards West Indian Federation had manifested itself long before, in the ideologies and activities of a number of individuals, associations and organisations which helped to raise the consciousness of the people of the region. The precursors of the Montego Bay conference included the Dominica Conference of 1932 and the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC), which as early as 1926 had declared its interest in a federal union. Various professional associations organised on a regional basis: the Caribbean Union of Teachers which after 1935 sought support for uniform education standards; the Caribbean Bar Association which after 1916 had as an objective the codification of the separate Island Laws; and the Civil Service Federation which after 1944 wanted the unification of the Regional Civil Service—all in their various ways supported the idea of the Caribbean integration movement. The work of men such as T. A. Marryshow, Uriah Butler and Albert Gomes also contributed to the process.

But even from as early as the mid-nineteenth century, individuals and organisations with different motives have sought to achieve Caribbean unity. The historical and cultural consanguinity of Caribbean peoples has been remarked on by persons as removed from each other in history, time and space as Père Labat, a Jesuit priest who was in the Caribbean in the eighteenth century, and Norman Manley, Premier of Jamaica in the 1950s and early 1960s. Labat made note of the cultural affinity of the region:

I have travelled everywhere in your sea of the Caribbean . . . from Haiti to Barbados, to Martinique and Guadeloupe, and I know what I am speaking about . . . You are all together, in the same boat, sailing on the same uncertain sea . . . citizenship and race unimportant, feeble little labels compared to the message that my spirit brings to me: that of the position and predicament which History has imposed upon you.

. . . I saw it first with the dance . . . the merengue in Haiti, the beguine in Martinique, and today I hear, de mon orielle morte, the echo of calypso from Trinidad, St Lucia, Antigua, Dominica and the legendary Guiana . . . it is no accident that the sea makes no difference to the rhythm of your body. ³
Norman Manley also remarked on the historical and spiritual bonds which unite the West Indian people. Addressing the Caribbean Labour Congress in 1947 in Jamaica he observed:

Above all I am impressed by the fact that wherever there is an Assembly of West Indians in the Caribbean area, there, immediately and obviously and without the slightest difficulty, you feel at home and as one. You are conscious of being with your own people... the sense of unity in the West Indies... is so powerful and so rapidly growing today that the minor historical differences are irrelevant in the face of [our]e innumerable common ties...

The question might well be asked if there is buried in the psyche of the Caribbean peoples such a compelling and powerful urge towards integration that it can survive the temporary setbacks and mistakes which have dogged the integration process. It is a salient question, for there has never been a movement or programme in the English-speaking Caribbean which has challenged or sought to reverse the move towards integration.

Gordon Lewis⁴ has pointed out that the Montego Bay Conference arose out of the conjunction of two factors: the need for West Indian unity and the reluctance of a weakened Britain, depleted and ravaged by the Second World War, to sustain the Caribbean, which had become a burden on the Exchequer. Decisions taken in Britain, then, were a prelude to the establishment of the West Indies Federation, and it was Britain that laid down the bases of the Federation experiment. The Federation, externally inspired, was of brief duration. The late Eric Williams, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, described its end in these terms: ‘The infant nation was presented to the world in the swaddling clothes made in the United States of America and out of the made-in-Britain shroud of colonialism.⁵

The failure of the West Indies Federation has had a powerful impact on the imagination of the Caribbean peoples and their Governments. This is not surprising: Federation was the great divide in the integration process. The problems leading to its dissolution have served as a lesson to the architects of the Caribbean Community. It may therefore be worthwhile to look briefly at some of the factors which hastened that dissolution.

The salient fact about the Federation’s birth as an external imposition is that it could not attract the support of the peoples and institutions of the region. But there were other factors at work, which might have undermined the federal idea propounded by the British Government. One of the most compelling of these was the creation of a structure which was so repugnant to the Caribbean people’s sense of their history and their sense of independence, that one wonders how it could have been considered in the first
place, even allowing for the prevailing political ethos of the time. Most of the main positions of the Federal structure were staffed by expatriates and the Federal Prime Minister, to all intents and purposes, was the clerk of the expatriate Governor General. The latter was all-powerful:

The Governor-General, in brief, had at his disposal powers normally accepted in Dominion Constitutional practice as belonging to the Prime Minister – the power to dissolve Parliament, the power to set up a ‘packed’ Upper House, even the power to argue his case in Cabinet as the recognised Master of certain of its members.  

The differences among the major states on the issue of the West Indies Federation had a negative impact on the smaller Leeward and Windward Islands. At several points along the way when Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica could not harmonise their positions in such a way as to protect their interests, these smaller islands understandably felt abandoned. But despite the resulting bitterness, a centralised federation under the leadership of Trinidad and Tobago seemed a distinct and hopeful possibility after Jamaica departed from the Federation. This did not materialise, as Trinidad and Tobago too saw the necessity to ‘go it alone’. The financial costs of leading the Federation were a prime consideration in this regard. The experiences of the smaller states with the Federation were to colour their attitude to the integration process and impel them to greater unity among themselves. But this sequence of events remains to be told.

Apart from the weakness inherent in its exogenous nature, the Federation was also undermined by insularity, suspicion, different conceptions as to how it should function, and the seductive attraction of national independence. But although the Federation perished, the idea of unity endured, as was reflected in developments in the mid-1960s.

In 1963, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago Eric Williams, concerned about Britain’s imminent entry into the European Economic Community, appreciative of the significance of the formation of economic groupings in different parts of the world, and convinced that the Caribbean must be part of this trend, initiated a number of meetings of the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth Caribbean. These conferences provided the Heads of Government with a forum to discuss plans and programmes to advance the cause of Caribbean integration.

The Prime Minister of British Guiana, Forbes Burnham, believed that Dr Williams was ‘courageous’ to re-start the integration process so soon after the collapse of the Federation. For it was the worst of times. Leaders shouted at each other across the Caribbean Sea. There was no dialogue or understanding. The unity of the region seemed to be in tatters. But Williams’ statesmanship
was shrewd. He knew that whatever hostilities might be expressed in the meeting, the act of meeting in itself could serve to put an end to the impasse in the integration process. Williams introduced a measure of coherence, stability and progress by initiating the meetings of the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth Caribbean.

In 1965, others who had inherited the mantle of Marryshow, Butler, Gomes and other visionaries of Caribbean integration met at Dickenson Bay to discuss the advancement of the integration process. And this has been the trend: the quest for identity remains at the centre of the thoughts, plans and actions of successive leaders of the region. It points to a compelling recognition that West Indian regionalism is a sustaining force and that the journey to the rendezvous of unity, though interrupted at points in our historical circumstances, must be continued. The contributions of these early West Indian politicians and statesmen have been of immense and lasting value because they were founded upon a common historical inheritance and an abiding faith in the common destiny of this region.

As founding fathers of the integration movement, Errol Barrow, Prime Minister of Barbados; Vere Bird, Prime Minister of Antigua; and Forbes Burnham, Prime Minister of Guyana, understood that there had been times in the West Indian past when faith and commitment to regionalism could be sustained only by taking a 'higher view' of history. Burnham in particular recognised the urgency of the moment and the necessity for action. At the 1967 Conference of Heads of Government of Commonwealth Caribbean countries, Burnham, then Prime Minister of a newly independent Guyana, urged that the imperative for integration must supersede any problems real or imagined:

We cannot start off with some ideal or perfect arrangement. Neither can we hope to be so prescient of the future as to be able to determine all the consequences and difficulties of integration. We can, and must, of course, try to analyse and anticipate as best as we can from available data, what the effects of integration may and can be made to be, but it would be folly par excellence to wait for perfect foresight. A perfect solution to, or institution for, integration cannot be hoped for. Let us to our own selves be true. These are the facts. This is the naked truth, either we integrate, or we perish, unwept, unhonoured.

The new arrangements for Caribbean integration were substantially different from those which had characterised the Federation. The Federation as an imposition had ignored the intellectual leaders of the region and taken no account of public opinion. The new Caribbean leaders eschewed any idea of a supra-national authority and sought to advance the economic development of the region. Their efforts led to the creation of the Caribbean Free Trade
Area (CARIFTA) of 1968 and the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) in 1973. A Free Trade Area of three became a full-fledged Community of twelve. A Secretariat and a Regional Development Bank were established.

The signing of the Treaty of Chaguaramas on July 4, 1973, provided Williams, Burnham, Barrow and then Prime Minister of Jamaica Michael Manley an opportunity to offer their vision of the Caribbean Community.

Williams reflected on the significance of the creation of the Community:

The Treaty is a landmark on the long road the Commonwealth-Caribbean has travelled since the dissolution of the West Indies Federation eleven years ago. We have experienced difficulties, friction, misunderstandings and tension. More than once we have faltered on the way, we have learned the hard way . . . the lessons of economic growth . . .

Burnham spoke in these terms:

I hope, I pray, I dream that the Caribbean will be able to teach the world a lesson, a lesson of how people who numbered their populations in terms of a few million can mobilise their resources for the benefit of their nation, the benefit of their region and ensure social justice, ban unemployment . . . some of us feel this as a matter of conviction, I hope that others of us will accept it as a matter of good sense and survival.

Manley made the following declaration:

We, in Jamaica, have regarded this occasion as implied in our mandate from the people of Jamaica last year. We have debated it in our Parliament, we have had full and fruitful discussions with our institutional leaders about the aspects of the Common Market which we now enter upon and the Community which we are now joining, and we have explained calmly, but I hope clearly, that it is inevitable when countries from the separate posture of their sovereignty seek to create new and meaningful relationships that there must be compromise and that compromise is justified by the size of the goals we pursue.

Barrow on this occasion contented himself with a description of how the Dickenson Bay Agreement led to the Treaty of Chaguaramas. But he had shared his vision in other addresses to meetings of the Caribbean Community. He believed that the Community should be people-centred, and argued that integration had taken place at the level of the peoples of the region but the political leadership had failed to institutionalise this development. At the Seventh Meeting of the Conference of CARICOM Heads of Government held in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1986, Barrow criticised the Community for inappropriate communication practices and for what he saw as its reduction of the regional integration movement to matters exclusively related to trade.