

# Ambassador Welters' Remarks: American Chamber of Commerce Annual General Meeting, Hilton Hotel, May 12, 2010 "T&T and the U.S.: A Strong Partnership"

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- Mr. Simon Aqui– President of the American Chamber of Commerce – thank you for your kind introduction
- Mr. Eugene Tiah– Outgoing President of the American Chamber of Commerce
- Other distinguished Directors of the American Chamber of Commerce Board and AmCham staff
- Valued members and member companies of the American Chamber of Commerce
- Especially invited guests
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and gentlemen.....

It is a great pleasure for me to be here. This is my first major address to a large group and I was delighted when the AmCham Board invited me to speak to your Annual General Meeting. I jumped at the chance for many reasons, not the least of which is the close ties between the AmCham and the U.S. Embassy. The Embassy was instrumental in getting the Chamber off the ground in the first half of the 1990s and your organization has now grown to become perhaps the most vibrant American Chamber of Commerce in the region .

With approximately 300 members, 25 percent multinational and 75 percent national, AmCham has become a force for progress regionally and inside T&T. Its commitment to open markets and international trade is well known and also evident in a single statistic -- member companies represent over 90 percent of foreign direct investment in Trinidad and Tobago. This is not an inconsiderable amount -- leaving aside the large sums invested from elsewhere, there is over US\$4 billion in foreign direct investment here from U.S. firms.

AmCham Trinidad and Tobago also has distinguished itself by its commitment to betterment and social progress in T&T. It interfaces with the government, offering valuable suggestions on the budget and in areas as diverse as trade and security. In addition, it hosts numerous valuable conferences, courses and seminars throughout the year, providing value to its members as well as to the nation.

Recently, it has gone even further afield sponsoring a Youth Productivity Forum that engaged twenty secondary schools across T&T in a competition to present recommendations on how labor, government, civil society and business could contribute to enhanced productivity and sustainable national competitiveness. This effort was recognized by the American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America

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(AACLA) with the "2009 Most Creative AmCham Program Award." I understand that it also led to a winning tune by the "Hugh Howard Productivity Posse" at the AmCham's Second Annual Calypso Competition. I am told this was a performance that no one who saw it will soon forget!

Beyond these shores, and recognizing the global nature of today's markets and business opportunities, the AmCham also projects itself internationally. It lobbies in Washington and participates in and leads trade missions in other capitals and is in the planning stages for one that potentially would go to Florida. It also was host for the 2008 Business Future for the Americas conference. That meeting brought together in Port of Spain, AmCham members from around the hemisphere and distinguished speakers to consider key future challenges, including on energy, the environment and sustainable development. The success of that event reflected well on the AmCham and was an impressive achievement that validated the organization's strength.

Now I have only been here a few short days so I have much to learn and look forward to my further interactions with the business community. I have a long history of working with and in the private sector so welcome this contact and I also look forward to hosting the Ambassador's AmCham reception later this year, once I am fully settled. My husband, Anthony, as many of you know, is a businessman, as well as philanthropist, and I hope you also will have a chance to get to know him in the days and weeks to come.

Since I am so new to your shores, let me ask your indulgence to pass along a very brief bit of my background. Prior to being honored by President Obama selecting me, and the Senate confirming me, to be Ambassador to T&T, I spent nearly thirty years involved in civic organizations aimed at expanding educational, career and cultural opportunities for people around the world, with a particular focus on youth. As the Founder and Chairwoman of the AnBryce and Vincent Wilkinson Foundations, I've focused on assisting underserved youths and young adults, while also participating in a variety of Boards and Executive Committees ranging from the Kennedy Center, to the Brookings Institution to the Library of Congress.

The attention that my husband and I have paid to the next generation through the foundations I mentioned and in other ways flows from many channels. On the surface, of course, it is a recognition that the future belongs to our young and we must do what we can to assure their success. But there also is a more personal side I want to share. Both Anthony and I come from meager beginnings. We were the first in our families to go to college and we learned from an early age the importance of education, sacrifice, working hard and finding our passion in life. This understanding helped shape us both and will inform my actions here.

I should add that I arrived on these shores already with a warm spot in my heart for the Caribbean and its talented people -- my paternal grandmother was born in Barbados and my maternal grandmother in Jamaica. These strong women were formative influences in my life and positive role models. I can think of no better way to honor their memories than to faithfully and efficiently represent the United States in Trinidad and Tobago, strengthening the political, economic, social and cultural ties between us based on a foundation of mutual respect and understanding.

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Before I turn to my vision of what I hope to accomplish in the future, I want to acknowledge that I start with a strong foundation in place. Not only have my predecessors worked diligently to better relations, but they have had much success. Some of this is due, of course, to the natural affinity Trinbagonians and Americans have for one another, and some of it is due to high-level diplomacy, but much of it comes out of the day-to-day work that the Embassy has done, and will continue to do, in conjunction with the government and people of Trinidad and Tobago. We are grateful for these ties, your friendship and our partnership.

When I mentioned high-level diplomacy, I was thinking especially of Trinidad's hosting of the 2009 Summit of the Americas, later followed by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The Summit was a key event for the United States and one that helped focus laudable attention upon T&T and its achievements. The Summit also represented President Obama's first opportunity to meet most of his hemispheric colleagues and to orient U.S. regional policy, and he left pleased and impressed by the accomplishments and management of the meeting and the warmth and hospitality of the people encountered.

Without going through a laundry list of what the Embassy and U.S. government do in T&T and the region, let me just mention a few initiatives and items. We expect to shortly begin the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, announced by President Obama when he was in Port of Spain. The CBSI, with initial funding of US\$45 million, will assist Caribbean nations, including Trinidad and Tobago, in bolstering security. The approach is intended to be holistic in nature, attacking criminal activity and the root causes of crime. The program grows out of CARICOM declarations and we have been working closely with Trinidad and Tobago and our other regional partners to design an initiative that fits real needs. A Ministerial meeting on this event in Washington is being planned for late May.

While the CBSI holds much promise, we at the Embassy already have been active partners in T&T's effort to counter crime. Over the last three years, the U.S. has donated bulletproof vests, canine detection dogs, computers, audio-digital court reporting systems and other equipment. We also have provided assistance to demand reduction and drug education programs while conducting a variety of training courses running the gamut from handling digital evidence to hostage negotiations to VIP protection to courses focused solely on Defense Force concerns. These efforts will continue throughout 2010 and we are already actively pursuing other collaborative opportunities for the years to come, both bilaterally and in a regional context.

When in Port of Spain, President Obama also invited countries in the region to participate in an Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas (ECPA). The tragic oil spill in the Gulf is a reminder, albeit an unhappy one, of the close connection between our energy and environmental futures. The first meeting of the ECPA, a voluntary and flexible group looking to advance energy security and efficiency and combat climate change, took place in Lima last July and the second meeting just took place in mid-April in Washington.

At that meeting, the U.S. pledged to provide a grant to the Organization of American States (OAS) so that technical and legal expertise could be lent to any Caribbean country seeking to get clean energy projects

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off the ground. Notably, Caribbean nations, the OAS, CARICOM, the World Bank, the IDB (Inter-American Development Bank) and officials from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands also launched a dialogue to explore the possibility of installing undersea electricity cables in the region.

We are pleased by T&T's strong participation in the Energy and Climate Partnership, and gratified that it held a Caribbean-focused ECPA session here in March to discuss establishing a Regional Renewable Energy Center in Trinidad and Tobago. We also are pleased that bilateral discussions on a "Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation on a Renewable Energy Research Center" are advancing. Working together with strong partners like T&T is vital to making hemispheric and broader progress in the key areas the ECPA looks to address.

In line with the goals of the ECPA, let me also congratulate Trinidad and Tobago for its positive action on climate change. As you recall, this was a major topic of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Port of Spain that occurred on the eve of the Copenhagen gathering. In addition, we were gratified that Trinidad and Tobago joined the United States and over 100 other nations in formally associating itself with the Copenhagen Accord in late January.

Climate change, as you are well aware, is one of the greatest threats facing our planet, and the United States is taking significant action to meet this challenge. Over the last year-and-a-half, the U.S. has done more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions than ever before through domestic policies that advance clean energy, climate security, and sustainable economic recovery, and by vigorously engaging in international climate negotiations. Our actions on the international front reflect that climate change is a global problem and, as such, requires a global solution.

In addition to the important initiatives announced at the Summit of the Americas that I just referred to, we are also moving forward regionally and bilaterally on the health front. Beyond the simple humanitarian urge to be of assistance, this reflects our belief that transnational threats of all kinds cannot be ignored and that governments need to "deliver" for their people.

Most notably, we are moving forward on a regional HIV/AIDS effort under the umbrella of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, better known as PEPFAR. The United States and T&T, along with a number of other Caribbean states, have agreed on a Partnership Framework to counter this disease. We have already held meetings with governments and stakeholders here and elsewhere with the intent of setting up a responsive program. Ideally, this Partnership will leverage knowledge and expertise wherever it is, and assure greater regional coordination. Initially, we are looking at well over US\$2 million for Trinidad and Tobago as part of this effort, with more to come in later years. To help support it, my Embassy recently put in place a local Center for Disease Control (CDC) employee to work with the Trinidad and Tobago Health Ministry. On the HIV/AIDS front, I should add that we are already involved with a US\$200,000 program to help the Defense Forces prevent this scourge from decimating its ranks.

Like the CBSI, this is not a program imposed from the outside, but rather a collaborative effort between our nations and others in the region. You may note that this is a common theme characterizing what the

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U.S. is doing bilaterally and more broadly. As President Obama stated here in Port of Spain, "As neighbors, we have a responsibility to each other and to our citizens. And by working together, we can take important steps forward to advance prosperity, security and liberty." Western Hemisphere Assistant Secretary Arturo Valenzuela further underscored this intent to work collaboratively when he told a U.S. congressional committee in March that the President had clearly signaled "that partnership would be the leitmotif of the United States' engagement in the Americas."

The U.S. also has been active in recent years on other humanitarian fronts. Through the visits of hospital ships and "boots on the ground," we have provided close to 30,000 free medical, dental and veterinary treatments to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago over the last three years. Competition for such visits is high in the world, and many of our resources this year have been diverted to Haiti, but we continue to make efforts to bring these programs here. I am pleased to announce that we will have another medical team in Trinidad in mid-2010 that will focus on free cataract surgeries. In line with our goal of partnering wherever possible, we have collaborated with the Ministry of Health to send two T&T doctors to a foreign clinic for training by American personnel in the latest cataract surgery techniques. We look forward to these persons working alongside our medical personnel during the upcoming exercise.

A compendium of all the U.S. does in partnership with T&T would be too lengthy for this talk. It is worth noting, though, that some assistance is provided in areas you might not think of. I alluded to Haiti earlier -- that tragedy reminds us of the need to prepare for disasters. In that regard, we worked in late 2008 and the early part of 2009 with T&T's Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management to coordinate two multiagency disaster management exercises, providing partial funding and subject experts. In the recent past, we also provided a US\$390,000 grant to the Trinidad and Tobago Airport Authority to assess the feasibility of establishing a regional air cargo hub here and helped fund a Buccoo Reef environmental project.

It is important for me to offer a caveat on American assistance and cooperation here. Sometimes the U.S. government is seen as an inexhaustible source of funds. I wish that were the case, but even when sending assistance to desperately poor countries, the U.S. has boundaries. In addition, Trinidad and Tobago's high income status -- it has been designated as such by the World Bank -- compared to many nations, limits the types of assistance we can offer, both legally and practically. We have, for instance, no U.S. AID Mission here. Within those strictures, however, we have and will continue to partner where we can.

Now what about my personal vision for the future of bilateral and regional ties? Recognizing I am new, I offer these comments in the spirit of dialogue. I may change my mind due to what I encounter or after conversations with you and others, but at least initially, I will be guided by a few fundamental principles.

The first of these, as I alluded to earlier, is to strengthen ties between our nations and peoples. This is, of course, in line with President Obama's framework for relations with the Americas. I believe such strengthening should be pursued not just at the government-to-government level, but also at a societal level, dealing with individuals and groups. Along these lines, expect to see more outreach and action from the Embassy on the educational and social betterment front, taking into account the funding caveat I

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mentioned earlier. We already do a laudable job here with our annual College Fair, expert U.S. speakers, educational and professional exchanges and other outreach programs, but I intend to do more.

The second fundamental principle that will guide me is respect for the government and people of Trinidad and Tobago. I do not see myself, a newcomer to your islands, lecturing you, but I also do not see myself avoiding speaking my mind. True friends can have disagreements, but be respectful. There will be policies, perhaps on UN votes where we would hope T&T would align itself more often with the U.S. and perhaps elsewhere, where we will not agree. I intend to be a forceful advocate for my country, but forcefulness and respect can go hand-in-hand. Reflecting this stance, I also will not take offense when my interlocutors forthrightly express their views.

The third fundament of my time here will rest on the proposition that our relations are and should be "win-win." We are in the same hemisphere, share the same view that governments need to be responsive, that democracy and human rights are vital, that citizen security is key and that trade and open markets are beneficial. Within this broad framework, I will seek a bilateral policy that is collaborative and beneficial to us all. And in line with this principle, it is worth recalling that the United States has worked well with all governments here since Trinidad and Tobago's founding. I look forward to this strong partnership continuing with whatever government the people of this beautiful land choose to elect on May 24<sup>th</sup>.

Finally, and not exhaustively, I intend to be a strong advocate for American citizens who encounter difficulties here. As a subset of this intent, I plan to be active on behalf of U.S. business interests when warranted. A growing economy serves all and with our two-way trade of \$11 billion, and the large foreign direct investment I mentioned earlier, I don't see how I could act otherwise. Sometimes this activity will be open, expressed in meetings, speeches or op-eds, but other times it will be private. And like all Embassies, we will seek to assure our national companies can compete here on a level playing field.

On that front, I just want to mention that in order to support U.S. businesses, the Departments of State and Commerce signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2009. This MOU authorizes Embassies such as ours to offer assistance on a fee-for-service basis to American companies looking to expand their markets overseas. Along these lines, we can assist with counseling, matchmaking, market research, promotional events and in other areas.

Through a specialized process that involves filing a request in Washington, we also can advocate on behalf of an American firm seeking a government contract here. Again, this is done in the spirit of assuring a level playing field for all bona fide competitors so they can compete on merits. If anyone is interested in these services, I encourage you to be in touch with the Embassy's Political and Economic Section. I should add that whenever we meet a U.S. company for the first time, we always ask them, "Have you spoken with AmCham yet?"

Now I do not want to go on for too long, but I imagine that a number of you are wondering what is up in Washington on the trade front. As you are aware from the press, trade pacts lately have had a slow go of

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it in the U.S. Congress, where approval is required. This is a function of many factors, not the least of which is the current worldwide economic climate. That said, the Administration is seeking to resolve outstanding issues on the pending Colombian, Korean and Panamanian Free Trade Agreements with an eye toward moving these forward at an appropriate moment.

A specific concern of many in this region is what will happen with the unilateral trade preferences that now exist for the Caribbean. This is a dynamic situation and, reflecting this, just on April 28, the Chairmen and Ranking Members of both the Senate Finance and House Ways and Means Committees introduced the "Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP) Act." About a week later, on May 5, the House of Representatives approved this bill and sent it to the Senate, which passed the act two days later and sent it to the White House for Executive Branch consideration.

This draft legislation would expand duty-free access to the United States for Haitian textile and apparel exports, as well as importantly extend the expiration date of the benefits of the U.S.-Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act (CBTPA) to September 30, 2020, ten years beyond their current scheduled end. While the bill is now being reviewed in the White House, its introduction in both chambers and quick passage is a positive indication of congressional interest in maintaining a strong trade relationship with the region.

Before closing, I also want to mention two other notable efforts – one bilateral and the other multilateral. First, the U.S. and T&T reached a comprehensive Open Skies Agreement on May 1 to expand and liberalize our civilian aviation relationship. This accord will strengthen and expand our already strong trade and tourism links.

On the multilateral front, I want to highlight another economic and trade related initiative and opportunity -- this is the "Pathways to Prosperity in the Americas." This initiative was launched in late 2008 to link together Western Hemisphere countries that are committed to democracy, trade and market economies. At its base, "Pathways" is designed to help countries collaboratively learn from one another's experience through the exchange of best practices with the goal of ensuring that the benefits of trade and economic growth are equitably shared among all sectors of society.

This focus reflects our strong belief that our partnership efforts must pay dividends to our citizens. The last "Pathways" meeting took place in March in San Jose, with Secretary of State Clinton in attendance. We were pleased, as well, that Trinidad and Tobago attended the session as an observer. At the meeting, and in line with the goal I just cited, Mrs. Clinton highlighted a number of areas for greater cooperation. These included the creation of small business centers, support for women entrepreneurs and expanding the use of secured transactions to help small businesses better access capital.

Let me now end essentially where I began. I've only been on your shores a few short days. I am learning, but look forward to this learning being a two-way street. I am appreciative to AmCham for this opportunity to speak and to you all for your efforts to advance what many view as the most dynamic economy in the region. I look forward to my tenure in T&T being a positive one for us all.

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Thank you.