

PRIZE GIVING CEREMONY – MAURITIUS ECONOMIC SOCIETY

Former Vice-President of the Republic, Mr. Raouf Bundhun

President of the Mauritius Economic Society, Mr. Ramdath Jadoo

Distinguished members of the MES

Participants in the Essay Competition

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I have lots of praise for the founders and members of the MES. Let me congratulate you and thank you on behalf of the nation for the work you have accomplished over the 54 years since the society was founded.

Back in the early 1960's when Mauritius was still a British Colony with a low-income, monocrop economy, fraught with a number of serious economic and social problems, you asked yourself what you can do for the country, you had a dream of a better Mauritius. Your visionary acumen led you to set up the MES with a view to sensitizing the population on vital economic issues: to propagate the study of more courses in economics and allied subjects, to carry out research, to conduct workshops, organise conferences, debates and competitions like the one you have recently organised on the theme: "The Challenges facing Mauritius towards a high income economy" and we are here today for the prize giving ceremony.

We know that after independence in 1968, the Mauritian economy relied on 3 pillars: sugar, manufacturing and tourism and that progressively the economy has been diversified further and, fast-forward, the result is that Mauritius today is a high middle-income economy ranked by the World Economic Forum as the most competitive economy in Sub-Saharan Africa, to give just one of the many positive indicators of our success.

I, for one, definitely believe that your efforts have significantly contributed in that remarkable success story and you deserve to be congratulated and encouraged to carry on, on the path to further progress. What is it that explains the success? You had the vision that a country like Mauritius, without mineral resources, should capitalize on its human resources and therefore investment should be in people. Investment in people means education and training – and for economic development and wealth creation, that education should be in economics and allied subjects. This is exactly what you are about and, along the years, you rightly focused on pressing issues of the day.

For example, in line with your objectives you organised workshops and conferences focusing on themes such as “the state of the economy”, “food security”, “ageing population”, “electoral reform”, “AGOA” and “Small and Medium Enterprises”. It is very comforting to note that, as an advisory body, you have developed and continued the tradition of submitting your proposals to the government at budget time. I am sure that many of your proposals have been reflected in the successive budgets including the recent one.

The present Government's long term plan is Vision 2030 and the Prime Minister's ambition is, in his words, "to achieve a second economic miracle" and take the country to the high income status.

Again it is comforting to note that your society harmonises with the political programme of the government of the day since you have organised this essay competition on this pressing issue of the day which is "the challenges facing Mauritius towards a high income economy".

Somebody has said that our success is not, in fact, miraculous in nature, but the result of hard work and self discipline; both of which have pride of place in your own philosophy.

The symbol of your society says it all: "The Ant". Congratulations for that choice. And let me say that I am impressed with your work. You have done justice to the meaningful symbol of the ant. In our schools we do teach or shall we say we do have our children learn and recite the fable, especially in French, – "La Cigale et la Fourmi". But I ask myself the question: Do the teachers take time to explain the moral lesson of hard work, organization, team work and discipline contained in the story? I think not. This point prompts me to make a suggestion to you.

To create wealth we have to increase production. One way to increase production is to increase productivity. Productivity depends not only on knowledge and skills required for the job but also on attitude i.e. the soft skills. I

think that this is the weak link in many cases. Attitude towards work, towards the boss and colleagues and towards the institution.

This is what the many motivational speakers like Stephen Corey, Shiv Khera and Robin Sharma talk about when they are invited to come and share with managers and other staff, members at managerial level, their knowledge and experience and give advice.

My point is that we have to consider integrating the attitude dimension in our educational training programmes at all levels in our schools and at the workplace because this is lacking and you know why. It is because our education system is disproportionately academic and exam oriented and at the workplace it's a "chacun pour soi attitude". This has got to change and if it does change, it will be so much the better for everybody.

On the subject of the root causes of poverty, I am personally worried about one observation that I have made in our Mauritian Society.

The number of children among the poor and less educated families of our population is much higher than that in affluent families. While the average number of children in the affluent families would be around 2-3, the average in the poor, less educated families especially in areas we term as "pockets of poverty", the average would be 5-6 or even more, with time this trend will be exponential and will lead to further poverty and countless economic and social problems.

I think, therefore, that one root cause of poverty is the absence for the inadequate attention to family planning among that section of the population. This is a problem that has got to be looked into. Research has to be carried out – an area which your society could perhaps look into.

Another weakness in our labour force which I think is not being given the required attention is the mastery and fluency in the English Language – the *lingua franca* in the world.

You may not agree with me but I have reasons to believe that because of this weakness we are losing out economically.

Why is it that while English is the most common spoken language of communication in the world, we have in Mauritius many more French speaking call centres and BPO's than English Speaking ones. Are we not losing out in availability of jobs in this sector? In my humble opinion, we are.

But this is just one example. There are many other instances where our level of spoken English puts us at a disadvantage.

Let me conclude by again congratulating the MES for its patriotic work. And thank you for having me as your Chief guest. I feel humbled and honoured. I would like to leave this message to the young members and young students.

Think of the economic situation in early 1960's described earlier when our country had a low income economy, and when that group of young intellectuals pondered on what "they" could do to change the situation for the better. The expected change has happened and to my mind they had a part in that change. They have upheld the advice of Mahatma Gandhi by enforcing themselves to **be the change**. You, as young intellectuals today, have inherited an economic situation with Mauritius being at the high middle-income economy. The challenge to you, the change that you will have to contribute to bring about, is to take your country to the high economy level. You can do it and I am sure you will do it, especially by capitalizing on new digital technology. We will accompany and guide you.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.

Paramasivum Pillay Vyapoory, G.O.S.K.
Vice-President of the Republic of Mauritius
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