

Farewell to COL Chair

Dinner Reception

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Farewell Speech for [Burchell Whiteman](#)

by

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In 2006, after seventeen years in government, when Burchell was taking on a new role as High Commissioner to the UK, The Jamaica Gleaner carried the headline, ‘Whiteman always a Gentleman’ . He is very popular with the Jamaican press who refers to him as Mr Nice Guy. Even the opposition loves him. This gentleman from the Caribbean is now widely recognized as Mr Nice Guy across the entire Commonwealth . At one of the earlier PCFs, there was a serious disagreement between two major institutions—matters would have gone out of hand if our chair had not put on his diplomat’s hat and quickly calmed the very ruffled feathers.

He is always calm and I’m sure this keeps him perennially popular with his beautiful partner Jolene and the children. During a meeting in India, Burchell’s laptop fell off his lap and broke into bits. The presentation he was due to make shortly was on that machine, and while a lesser mortal might have panicked, Burchell remained totally unperturbed. Perhaps he was already thinking of the new iPad he wanted to buy. And as you know now, he never leaves home without it!

He has travelled long distances for COL and brought with him an air of dignity and respect, wherever he went. Even when he suffered! Once after he was dropped off with full VVIP protocol at a certain airport, the immigration officers decided to turn their full attention to his passport, researched every detail and kept him engaged for 45 minutes, while the rest of the COL staff went through. Not a word of complaint from Burchell !

I asked Sir John Daniel who is travelling in Europe at the moment, for a message and he says how greatly he appreciated Burchell’s presence on COL’s Board throughout his time as president, first as the member for the Caribbean and then as chair. He was wonderfully wise and supportive in both roles. Sir John adds that it was a special pleasure to visit him in Jamaica and he will always remember Burchell driving him down a steep and winding road in the Blue Mountains while simultaneously talking on the phone and texting on his Blackberry, a feat of coordination that only a former Minister of Communications could have achieved.

I have had the privilege of knowing Burchell over my years at COL and he has always been very popular with our staff who enjoyed their brief interactions with him. As a CEMCA colleague put it, “our chair never forgets us even if you do”.

Burchell is a very sensitive leader, philosopher and statesman. People have always looked forward to his presentations at meetings of Commonwealth Education Ministers, Foreign Ministers or PCFs. The reason is that his brief speeches always carry some deep insight and unique perspective conveyed with his special eloquence. Let me quote from his closing speech at PCF 7. ‘Very many more years ago than I care to remember, my father – who was himself a teacher – shared a story from his experience that I have never forgotten. A repairman had charged him £1 and 6 pence for doing a particular job (£1 = \$5. 6d a fortieth of a £). When he asked the person why the charge could not have been set and rounded off simply at £1, the reply was “Oh, the 6 pence was for doing what I did. The £ was for knowing what to do.” This combination of ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ is central to COL’s ‘learning for development’ approach and Burchell has always inspired and encouraged us to make a difference in the field.

I was only six days old in my new job as President when I went in to my first board meetings. This was really starting at the deep end—Burchell and all the board members understood this and thanks to your support, we had one of the most fruitful and pleasant meetings that I can recall!

Burchell has been a dream Chair. COL is a high performing yet humble organization with respect for all. So is our Chair. This partnership is unique in which the values of the organization and the values of the Chair came together in perfect harmony. To take some liberties with Shakespeare, whom I know Burchell is partial to, let me rephrase his famous words:

‘His life is gentle; and the elements
So mix in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the Commonwealth, WHAT A CHAIR!’