



REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

REMARKS

BY

The MINISTER OF LABOUR AND SMALL AND MICRO ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

HONOURABLE ERROL MCLEOD

At the

Joint Breakfast Meeting of HRC Associates Management Consultants and the Trinidad and
Tobago Chamber of Commerce

At

Port-of-Spain

On the theme

“Bridging the Labour –Management Divide in Trinidad and Tobago”

On

Friday 10th May 2013

At

7:00 a.m.

- Helen Drayton - **Independent Senator;**

- Carl Francis - **Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development;**

- Dr. Michael Macoby -**International Expert on Labour Relations;**

- Keston Nancoo - **Chairman Employee Consultative Association;**

- Hollick Rajkumar - **Managing Director HRC Associates;**

- Moonial Lalchan - **President, Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce;**

- Catherine Kumar - **Chief Executive Officer, Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce;**

- **Members of the Media;**

- **Specially invited guests;**

- **Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Good Morning to you all.

Bridging the labour-management divide in Trinidad and Tobago is undoubtedly a critical issue to national development. Even in environments that are heavily regulated, conflict is often most evident. The challenge for us however, is not only about avoiding conflict but also about effectively managing it where it exists. The success of every organization is dependent on good relations between employers and employees, so therefore by working toward minimizing conflict in the workplace we improve human relations which in turn aids productivity.

Today, in Trinidad and Tobago, conflict has been facilitated by changes in the work environment as well as lingering disputes in the negotiation of collective agreements. An increase in worker awareness of their rights and responsibilities has also contributed to workplace changes. In the absence of a steady consensus building mechanism, heightened worker awareness and management's efforts to improve productivity have resulted in sometimes confrontational approaches to settling wages and other industrial relations matters. This counterproductive situation can be mitigated by promoting the principle of meaningful consultation among the key players in the economy with the effecting of social dialogue.

The social partnership model is based on the collaboration of the bi-partite and/or tripartite partners to address critical industrial relations issues. There exists a mutually reinforcing relationship between social dialogue at the enterprise level and social dialogue at the national level with both forms contributing significantly to building the bridges which connect employers and workers. This collaborative strategy encourages both labour and management to adapt a needs-based bargaining stance as opposed to positional bargaining as the basis for resolving hostile situations. Another benefit of its use is its ability to improve the quality of the decision-making by increasing the level of trust, respect and communication among the parties.

I am pleased to say that the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development is currently leading the initiative in establishing a social dialogue process in Trinidad and Tobago. Last year, Cabinet approved certain actions which will allow us to establish a framework where Government, Employers and Workers could address issues of national importance. Subsequent to that decision, the Ministry convened a two-day Workshop on the Social Dialogue Process for Trinidad and Tobago held under the theme "***Towards People-Centred Development: Social Dialogue as the Key Driver***". The Workshop brought together over one hundred participants including regional tripartite partners and representatives of government, business, trade unions, civil society and youth from Trinidad and Tobago.

Representatives from Barbados, Jamaica, Aruba and Mauritius joined local participants in sharing information on their respective countries' social dialogue processes and experts from the ILO provided technical insights from a global perspective on the role and benefits of social dialogue. One very important outcome of this Workshop was the open declaration of

commitment by employers' and workers' representatives to building a strong and sustainable social dialogue process in our country.

The Workshop was followed by a series of breakfast meetings involving government and leaders in business and labour which sought to assist us in fine tuning the philosophical underpinnings and operational framework of the social dialogue process. Our next step is to formally establish a Task Force comprising representatives of government, business and trade unions which will be responsible for operationalizing the social dialogue process.

It should be noted that some of your organizations were invited to nominate high-level representatives to serve on the Task Force and I am pleased to say that we have submitted your recommendations to the Cabinet and look forward to the Task Force commencing its most important work of placing emphasis on socio-economic concerns that affect national development. We can indeed look forward to exciting times ahead as this Government holds true to its commitment of participatory governance and inclusion of all.

At the level of the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development, social dialogue is alive and remains the cornerstone of our approach to policy formulation and decision-making. In addition to our existing tripartite and multipartite Boards and Committees, which advise on a range of issues such as minimum wage, occupational safety and health, labour standards and issues related to HIV and AIDS in the workplace, we have established, and in some cases reconstituted, a number of Committees and Councils over the past year, a critical one being the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee (I.R.A.C.) which was reconstituted in 2012 after thirty-two years. This Committee has been doing some very interesting work as part of its review of the Industrial Relations Act which we will share with our stakeholders as the work advances.

Among our social partners, employers and worker representatives have also indicated their interest in decreasing the degree of conflict in the workplace as a mechanism for increasing international competitiveness. The treatment of the frequent 'divide' between labour and management is not necessarily only focused on the source of conflict in the workplace but relate to the source of the conflict-the very divide. This paradigm is indeed a common feature of the numerous labour-management disputes that surface. Greater use of social dialogue would therefore promote consensus for building capacities, maximizing available resources and increasing the delivery of value on matters of national importance.

Dialogue, particularly in the periods of economic downturn, is an important component of good governance, social harmony and economic prosperity. I firmly believe that there isn't anything that could not be solved by dialogue, whether it is bipartite dialogue (between employers and workers), tripartite dialogue (Government, employers and workers) or tripartite-plus dialogue which involves the inclusion of civil society representation.

The social dialogue process however must not operate in a vacuum. It is imperative on the Government as the administrative arm of the tripartite approach to enable the legal environment that will better support the social dialogue process, through legislative reform. Historically, labour legislation in our country has generally been a reflection of the government's developmental framework to stimulate workplace productivity and investment. However, there has been some limitation in the application of the Industrial Relations Act (IRA) of Trinidad and Tobago of 1972, in achieving a balance between Government policy and worker development. The IRA, in its current form, is not sufficiently adequate to address issues that pertain to the employment of domestic workers for example.

When conflict arises; the response is tantamount to 'fire-fighting', that is to say, resorting to action only when a problem arises. By contrast, the recommendation from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is for State parties to consider preventative conciliation in formulating good labour relations policies.

While keeping in mind the above framework as recommended by the ILO for dispute resolution, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that sound workplace policies and procedures serve as a foundation for successful business. It also fosters good workplace relations pen lines of communication between workers and management, as well as worker participation in decisions that affect the workplace contribute to prompt and equitable settlement of collective labour disputes.

Ladies and gentlemen, safety in the workplace remains another area of concern for labour, management and government. There is a tendency to make frequent claims that occupational safety and health issues are inadequate at various workplaces but workplace safety remains in the hands of both employers and employees. This is yet another area where there is tripartite responsibility.

In closing, I wish to reiterate that social dialogue should be considered favourably by all stakeholders as an alternative means of fostering positive labour relations, boosting productivity and efficiency and ultimately creating a culture of collaboration in the workplace. Its success rests, however, on our continued partnership with each other as labour stakeholders. Ladies and gentlemen, there must be a clear and cohesive message from the social partners that the social dialogue process will be adopted as a workable approach to addressing the labour-management divide. Any proposal aimed at bridging this divide will not be effective if it excludes any of the social partners. The success of the social dialogue process lies in the input and compromise of each stakeholder. If every one were to ride their respective high horse, the race will never be won. The future of the country depends on a better approach to these matters. Let us not disappoint those for whom we will leave this great nation. Let us not destroy it before we leave it.

Thank you.

