



Feature Address

By

The Honourable Maxie Cuffie, MP

At the

Seventh Annual First Time Authors' Appreciation Programme

National Library and Information System Authority

April 27th, 2016

Salutations:

- Madam Chairperson
- Ms. Elizabeth Mahadeo, Executive Director NALIS
- Ms. Diane Simeon, Deputy Executive Director, NALIS
- BOCAS Lit personnel (to be identified)
- NGC personnel (to be identified)
- Other distinguished ladies and gentlemen
- Members of the Media
- And our very specially invited guests today, our 70 first-time authors

In the normal course of my working week, I am called upon to speak several times, in several different fora and to several different audiences. In many of those instances, I'm unsure as to how many of those present are actually listening to the content of my presentations, but they do clap very politely at the end. I must confess though that sometimes I wonder if the applause is not born out of some sense of obligation to not make the Minister feel too badly, or rather out of genuine appreciation for the speech I had taken so much time to prepare.

Now I am sure there will be some applause at the end of this speech, perhaps to signal your relief that I am finally through, but that is because you are a different audience. You are writers, authors whose stock in trade is your ability to weave a story together, pulling different ideas into a single tapestry that makes your reader, either plumb the depths of misery with you, or scale the heights of ecstasy, somersaulting from one emotion to another, and finally collapsing into an unexpected climax. Writers are indeed a different breed.

What do I say then, to NALIS, who has maintained this tradition for the last six years, so much so that 196 new authors have been recognized since the inception of this programme in 2010? A mere “thank you and keep up the good work” does not seem to convey the gratitude of not just myself, but the 196 authors whose work in advancing our literary storehouse and national bibliography has been recognized, irrespective of how many copies of their work have been sold.

Perhaps I need to say to NALIS, to the Executive Director and her team, that you remain one of the most important jewels in the crown that is the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications.

As your new line Minister, I realise that you have endured a tremendous lot over the past five years, but because you stuck diligently to your mandate, you have weathered the storms. The absence of a Board of Directors for inordinately long periods, combined with the non-appointment of a Chairman to provide direction and purpose for the duration of the last Board, could not have made your jobs any easier.

Today, I join with the 196 authors who have had their work exposed and recognized through this First Time Authors' Appreciation initiative to applaud the NALIS team for providing this forum for authors. Indeed, for many of our First Time Authors, this programme is the only one of its kind that affords them some measure of public recognition and acclaim.

Today I commend your new carefully chosen Board of Directors to you, and give the assurance that they are prepared to work with you to achieve all the very laudable objectives you have set for yourself.

What do I say to the organisers of the Bocas Lit Festival who have now embraced this First Time Authors Appreciation Programme as an integral part of its total package for 2016? Those of us who have had the privilege of experiencing similar Literary festivals in other jurisdictions, continue to be pleasantly surprised by the exponential growth of your Festival over the past six years into something that can easily hold its own anywhere in the world.

Your decision to undertake one hundred events of such immense diversity and complexity in the space of nine days has only been bettered by the Creator who, himself, we are told, rested after six.

From the great epics of world literature spanning the countries of India in the form of the Hindu Ramayana, Great Britain and Spain in the works of Shakespeare and Cervantes, to the equally compelling Caribbean writers Wilson Harris and Paul Keens-Douglas, to the hauntingly refreshing memories of the immortal “Jean and Dinah”, you have managed to capture not just our literary attention, but the soul of who we are as a people, and what makes us the huge melting pot of brokenness and blessedness that we are often loathe to accept.

I would want to suggest though, that the true stars of today’s programme are the 70 First Time Authors whom we celebrate today?

You have endured the baleful stares and woeful glances of those who never believed your dream that one day you would be a published author; who doubted that one day, you would write a book.

You would have suffered through every writer's dilemma – the dreaded writer's block, you would have handled the drama of selecting and I dare say, paying a publisher; so that today you can proudly boast of having added your name to the national bibliography, that from this day forward, your name will forever be etched into the annals of publishing history here in Trinidad and Tobago.

But your journey to this place of accomplishment could not have been easy. Indeed, we know it is the road less travelled, because so many have set out to accomplish your dream, and for want of proper facilities, for want of proper incentivisation, have shelved their dream, either until the hidden man in the Play Whe machine smiles on them or the grandmother they love to hate finally is in a position to leave them a little something in her last will and testament.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Government in which I have the privilege to serve, believes that there are several intrinsic areas of strength in the national economy which, if properly harnessed, will allow us to achieve sustainable growth, and the printing and publishing industry is certainly one of them.

We believe that in Trinidad and Tobago, we have a plethora of creative, adaptable and resilient people possessive of appealing, artistic and cultural expressions who can take us out of our dependence on non-renewable resources. Indeed, the evidence, compelling and cogent as it is, sits right before me today.

Your gift, your talent, is renewable. Your gift can be nurtured, can be cultivated, can be encouraged, so that the young ones are born before the old ones die. The cultural industries, of which you are no less a part, can create value, can generate income, produce goods and services and create employment. You, by sheer dint of your work, can also drive innovation and create growth in the economy.

When one examines how many different skill sets that were necessary to have brought us to this point, how many different persons who were involved in you being able to produce and publish a book today, it is evident that we are sitting on an unexplored treasure trove waiting to be discovered. As we seek to significantly reduce our traditional reliance on the extractive industries, as a Government, we have set as one of our priorities the promotion and encouragement of commercial viability and commercial vision amongst our cultural practitioners.

I have no doubt that ladies and gentlemen that you will rise to the challenge. This cannot be your only book. This must not be your only book. I give you the assurance that you will have a friend in NALIS, that you will have an avenue for expression in the Bocas Lit Festival, and you will have a willing facilitator of your growth in the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Today, on behalf of the Government and people of this great Republic, I offer my sincerest congratulations to all our authors, first time and otherwise.

I offer my sincere gratitude to NALIS, the Bocas Lit Festival organizing committee, and the many other sponsors who have combined their time, talent and treasure, to make this year's festival, the tremendous success that is so palpably evident before us.

I pray that the fountain of your inspiration may continuously overflow, that the wellsprings of your creativity may never run dry, and your determination to succeed beyond all telling, be your constant source of motivation. May God bless you and our nation.