

**Address by His Excellency Professor George Maxwell Richards TC, CMT, Ph. D,
President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, at the Inaugural “Do Right
Champions” Awards Ceremony at Queen’s Hall on January 30th 2012.**

Thank you, Chairman, Mr. Anthony Harford

Dr. the Honourable Tim Gopeesingh, Minister of Education

Mr. Kenneth Gordon, Chairman of the Integrity Commission

Assemblyman Whitney Alfred, Secretary for Education, Tobago House of Assembly

Other Members of the Integrity Commission

Parents, Teachers and Students

Members of the Media

Other Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I was very pleased to hear of the “Do Right Champions” competition inaugurated by the Integrity Commission, last year, with the full support of the Ministry of Education and of the Tobago House of Assembly, as well.

The Commission, in its wisdom, has chosen to capture the attention of our children, at an early age, so that they may be pointed in a direction that is likely to encourage them, as youth and then as adults, to make the best possible contributions that they can to nation-building, on solid principles.

The question of right and wrong has engaged the attention of humankind, from the beginning of time and, in this context, it has become necessary to lay down rules, sometimes written, for the organization and governing of people. Quite apart from the laws that govern the conduct of people, there are principles which have guided us in treating with one another. There is no gainsaying that, over the years, many correct guiding principles have been assailed, as self-gratification overwhelm our societies and right and wrong are seen, more and more, in relative terms. It is being said that what is wrong for you is right for me, even when the circumstances are the same, leading to utter confusion, so far as moral standards are concerned.

A significant result of this competition, I expect, could be the placing of the Integrity Commission of Trinidad and Tobago, to a greater extent, into the consciousness of the nation, most importantly, among children of school age. This can help to convey a proper perspective of the Commission, without the negative sensation which sometimes accompanies stories concerning its work.

In the first place, the competition draws the attention of youth to the existence of an Integrity Commission. Young people in our country can be sensitized to the matter of integrity in the

national context and ask the question concerning the Commission: “What is it for?” It is a good place to set a focus for the generation of our people whose duty it will be, in time, perhaps, to lead the country. But it is not only a matter of leadership. It is a matter of the quality of people that we nurture, at every level, for the advancement of the country.

One dictionary defines integrity as follows: “The quality of having strong moral principles”. But how are these principles formed? Are standards supposed to shift from time to time and from person to person and, on whose authority? Can societies proceed on this basis? How can we build stable societies if the rules keep changing and the bases for our actions are therefore not secure?

There was a very popular, melodious song, some years ago, whose lyrics were, in part, “This can’t be wrong, when it feels so right.” This was a clear invitation to judge right and wrong on the basis of feelings. I am sure that, if we think it through, we can see what a recipe for disaster that can prove to be.

The reality is that doing what is right often requires that we set aside our personal feelings, in the interest of the greater good. In other words, doing what is right can require sacrifice, to a greater or lesser extent. However, what should be the guiding force is not so much the sacrifice, but the lasting positive results.

Sportsmen and sportswomen, for example, know that if they are to be at the top of their game, they must discipline themselves to do the right thing: practise, eat health-giving foods, rest and keep their minds focused on the prize. They must do this, without a taskmaster cracking a whip, so to speak, over them. They must do what they have to, in order to win, within the law and not with the help of illicit drugs or match-fixing. The truth is usually exposed and even if it is not, that is not a reason to cheat.

This leads me to raise the question: “When should we do right?” Because of the setting in which we are, the answer seems easy and we may all respond: “Always.” However, that is more easily said than done, because “always” means – even when no one is watching. It is relatively easy to do right when we can be noticed by onlookers. In those circumstances, we are not at all shy to receive the praise of others. The real test of integrity comes when we are without supervision, when all the elements exist for cover up, yet we do what is right, without the praise of others.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, **there is a difference between genuine mistake and contrived ignorance. There are times when, in the absence of knowledge of the rules, we fail to apply commonsense which should lead us to enquire and as a result, we may make grave mistakes. Integrity would require us to accept responsibility for our error and not seek to blame others.**

Quite apart from the knowledge of rules, there is the matter of conscience. There is a saying: “Let your conscience be your guide.” There is some merit in that advice, because there is, within each of us, a guiding light, if you will, which gives a warning signal when an action or thought is not right. However, when conscience is seared, over time, because of habitual wrong-doing, the virtue in that saying does not apply.

There are many areas in which the matter of integrity comes into play and often, one has to make a choice between personal interest and the welfare of others. For example, some choose to be silent in the face of evil, when their speaking out would declare the truth of a matter and put responsibility where it ought to be. This may result in the sacrifice of their popularity or the loss of friends. Some stand up for nothing and as a result, they fall for anything. Yet others pride themselves in taking the middle ground, which in some instances may well be a good thing, but in others, may reek of the worst aspects of compromise.

Recently, I heard someone say, in this same vein, that if a teacher says that two and two make four and another says that two and two make five, the answer does not lie in the middle. I was arrested by the depth of that statement. Two and two can never make four and a half. Yet, too many of us chose that type of middle ground, a compromise which is prepared to deny the truth.

In our personal lives and in public negotiations, there is room for compromise, when we seek to make accommodations for the benefit of all parties concerned and even for future generations. However, we must recognize, always, even in negotiations with a proper motive and objective, that truth cannot be compromised and like cork, it will come to the surface, at some time.

I am pleased to note that, in its first year, there was a grand total of one thousand, three hundred and seventy-six (1,376) entries, with Primary Schools accounting for one thousand and seven (1,007) of these. That is indeed a very good beginning and the range of options for expression seems to have provided fair chances for participants.

I congratulate the organizers of this competition on their foresight in providing an avenue whereby school children may develop a better understanding of their own responsibility, to themselves and to others, to do right. I thank them, as I thank the teachers, administrative staff, where applicable, parents and others who have collaborated in this ground-breaking project, which must go from strength to strength and buttress other efforts, if not take the lead, to secure for us a nation of men and women of integrity.

In closing, may I congratulate all the participants and especially those who are the first recipients of prizes – the winners in the inaugural contest, The Do Right Champions 2011.

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, for the courtesy of your attention.

May God bless our Nation!

