

An Education Nation

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Guyana has changed significantly since Robert Cyril Gladstone Potter graduated with a Class 1 Teachers' Certificate from the Mico Training College in Jamaica. Mico College is the oldest and most prestigious teacher training college in the Western Hemisphere and Cyril Potter was one of the most outstanding graduates of the class of 1920.

Cyril Potter excelled in his studies and sports at Mico College just as he had at Queen's College where he won several academic prizes and was a first-class athlete, cricketer and footballer. He returned home to teach at his *alma mater* and elsewhere. He was later appointed principal of the Government Training College for Teachers which was renamed the Cyril Potter College of Education in 1976 – the centenary of compulsory primary education in Guyana.

Cyril Potter was a patriot. Talented and versatile, he composed the music for Guyana's *National Anthem* and other patriotic songs such as *My Guyana El Dorado*, *A Song of Hope* and *Way Down Demerara*. It would be difficult to find a more worthy person in whose honour the Teachers' Training College could have been named.

Cyril Potter would have sat as a young graduate of Teachers' College ninety-two years ago just like you today. Dressed in medieval gowns – which you never wore before and, most likely, will never wear again – you are participating in an ancient, academic rite of passage. This quaint garb, this elaborate convocation, these fancy certificates, this happy assembly of family, friends and dignitaries are not an inane annual amusement. They signify public recognition of your assumption of a wider responsibility, of your transition to a higher level of authority and of your acceptance of a heavier burden of duty.

This ceremony is also a celebration of your accession to membership of an education élite. It represents the completion of a regime of rigorous study. It marks the declaration of your aspiration to accomplish the mission of this institution: *To provide the education system with academically and professionally-trained teachers at the nursery, primary and secondary levels.*

Guyana, today, is a country of bright prospects but also one of colossal complexity. A field of unprecedented opportunities lies before you. The opportunity for engineers to build bridges and roads to open our vast hinterland and to develop schemes to exploit our hydro-electrical potential; the opportunity for geologists to develop our bauxite, diamond, gold, manganese and quarrying resources; the opportunity for biologists, botanists, zoologists and agriculturists to expand food production; the opportunity to improve communication and human learning; the opportunity for manufacturers, shippers, builders to drive our economy forward at a faster rate.

Where will these scientists come from? These opportunities cannot be fully exploited and this country cannot be developed by chance or by conjecture. They cannot be achieved while a large part of the population is paralysed by poverty. They cannot be achieved by the ignorant or the illiterate. They cannot be achieved while so many primary school children cannot qualify to enter secondary school or when thousands of children drop out of our primary and secondary schools every year. They cannot be achieved while school-leavers cannot find jobs.

They can be achieved only by people with a first-class education. They can be achieved only by the creation of an 'education nation' that brings all our people together in a knowledge society. They can be achieved only by combining our energies, integrating our communities and working together for the common good, rather than pulling apart. Dark forces – poverty, oppression and hatred – threaten to pull us apart. An education nation ought to be one in which intelligence prevails over ignorance, cooperation over confrontation and national integration over

communal disintegration.

The world into which you are graduating today is far different from the one into which Cyril Potter went forth to serve as a teacher ninety-two years ago. That was a time when the television was not yet invented; when cameras, radios, motor cars, telephones and even wrist watches were luxurious rarities.

You are entering a different world. This nation cannot afford to be left out of the communication, education and information revolution that has transformed world civilisation.

The words I utter at this very moment could be transmitted at the speed of light around the world – by personal computers, smart telephones, Facebook, Twitter and You Tube. Images can be sent in real time to almost every country in the world. Your relatives in Lethem, Linden and Leonora can receive photographs of this graduation ceremony and can forward them to friends in London or Orlando in the twinkling of an eye.

Information, technology and science pull us together relentlessly, integrating our communities and connecting our country with the world. Science, technology and mathematics, therefore, must be at the core of this College's curriculum. The knowledge that you have gained over the past three years at College is a mere drop in the ocean of experiences you will encounter over the next thirty years. You are only now embarking on a more exciting expedition of exploration. The quest for new knowledge and new understanding must drive you forward from this day.

How exciting it would be if, as an intern, each of you could spend at least one semester teaching Guyana's children from our hundreds of villages – those along the rivers of the Barima-Waini Region; on the mountains of the Potaro-Siparuni; in the savannahs of the Rupununi; by the lakes of the Pomeroon-Supenaam; beside the waterfalls of the Cuyuni-Mazaruni; on the banks of the Essequibo Islands; overlooking the rice fields and sugar plantations of the Corentyne, the fish ports of Berbice and the mines of Upper Demerara. This joy would reflect the spirit of wonder that should inspire the greatest profession in the nation which you have entered today – teaching.

We know of the challenges that you have faced over the past three years. We are aware of your tiny stipends. We know of the relentless cycle of student assignments. That is why we shall continue to work towards giving 'one lap top per teacher' from the first day he or she enters College.

We are alarmed at the number of untrained and unqualified teachers and the inordinate length of time it takes to earn a full degree. That is why we must continue to aim at making every single teacher a university graduate in the shortest time possible. We know that poor pay contributes to the intolerable teacher turnover rate. That is why we must aim at elevating teaching to become the best-paid profession in the entire public service. We want Guyana's best teachers to remain right here—in Bagotville, in Bartica and in Bath Settlement—rather than fleeing to The Bahamas, to Belize or to Botswana to make their living.

Today, this ancient graduation ritual reminds us that you are participating in a proud pedagogical tradition. Every progressive society in history honours its teachers – the *Brahmin*, the *mwalimu*, the *rabbi* or, as they say right here in the Mazaruni, the *enupaneng*. So we honour you today.

We know that you will have to be creative, compassionate and committed if you are to

contribute to the construction of a community in which everyone can co-exist and enjoy a good life. Such a community must value cultural differences; it must value the lives of citizens; it must value the rights of children. Let us, for the children's sake, hear no more that the Teaching Service Commission has had to dismiss three or four teachers on average every week for misconduct.

Education is an entitlement. Primary education has been compulsory in Guyana for 136 years. Article 27 of the *Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana* states: "Every citizen has the right to free education from nursery to university..." Teachers now have an obligation to ensure that education reaches those who can least help themselves – the nation's children. Teachers must embrace a professional culture – one that imparts a first-class education and one that respects the personal worth of each child.

Teachers are in a unique position to fulfill the motto of this great College – 'We serve.' Let those words not remain an inert inscription on the insignia of the College but adopt them as your inspiration to serve. The teaching profession is one of vast opportunity but it is also one of great responsibility. You are also in a position to lead and serve the next generation.

I started this charge by reflecting on the service of Cyril Potter – a man who instructed and inspired me several decades ago. I never heard him shout at anyone. I never saw him strike a student. He was a man of culture. He was committed to advancing human knowledge and to building a country in which all Guyanese could live in safety and enjoy a good life.

My charge to you could easily have been to "be like Potter". Be good at learning, good at teaching, good at sport, good at studies, good at culture, good at serving, good at tolerating the opinions of others and good at loving Guyana passionately. It was with teachers like Cyril Potter that this profession was built.

I now offer this charge to the graduates of the Cyril Potter College of Education gathered here in this 78th year of its existence. Contribute to the country in which you were born but contemplate a better future for the country in which you want to live. Live in your own community but think on a country-wide and on a Continental and Caribbean scale. Share your knowledge. Enjoy our unique cosmopolitan society. Employ your energy, your experience, your expertise and your education to build a nation of which we can all be proud.

I charge you to go forth to teach and train the children in your care. I charge you to help to make Guyana an education nation. Robert Cyril Gladstone Potter's long life was a model of dedication to education and to this nation. Were he here today, he would not have given you a less compelling charge.

Congratulations and may God bless you all!

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Brigadier David Granger is the Leader of the People's National Congress and A Partnership for National Unity and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly of Guyana.