

ADDRESS BY

THE HON. KENNETH VALLEY
MINISTER OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY
MINISTER IN THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE

AT THE LAUNCH OF

**SPANISH AS THE FIRST FOREIGN LANGUAGE
INITIATIVE (SAFFL)**

9:00 AM,
TUESDAY, MARCH 22, 2005
TTMA HEADQUARTERS
10TH STREET
BARATARIA

- ❖ Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- ❖ Permanent Secretaries
- ❖ Members of the Cabinet Appointed Spanish as the First Foreign Language Steering Committee
- ❖ Members of the Media
- ❖ Ladies and Gentlemen
- ❖ Good Morning / Buenos Días

This is indeed a historic day for us in Trinidad and Tobago, ten to fifteen years from now, we will look back at this significant initiative as a giant step towards merging our economy with that of our Latin American neighbors. Dr. McNicol outlined for you the objectives of the program, but for me and my Ministry, this program has one overriding mandate, that Trinidad and Tobago becomes an effective intermediary between the Spanish speaking South and English speaking Northern sectors of our hemisphere.

Today we celebrate the launch of the Spanish as the First Foreign Language Program, known to those of us involved in its development by the acronym - SAFFL. This project is of great significance to the

citizens of Trinidad and Tobago because it is an important step in the process of integrating our economy with that of Latin America.

By declaring Spanish as the First Foreign Language of T &T, the Government has made a bold move to prepare our citizens for the challenges and opportunities of regional expansion.

When we initiated plans to propel this nation to developed country status by the year 2020, Government recognized that along with formulating and implementing policies at the trade and investment levels, we had to equip our people with the appropriate skills, training and techniques in order to compete effectively on the global stage. Today, we know that one of the most important abilities we can develop as a nation is proficiency in both the English and Spanish languages, to provide prospective investors with a workforce that can communicate effectively and conduct business in the two dominant languages of this hemisphere.

As a predominantly English-speaking nation determined to become the regional business, manufacturing and trans-shipment hub, our

strategy to accomplish this vision incorporates the development of a competitive advantage in relation to neighboring countries. While we do enjoy a strong geographic position and highly developed business sector, our economic goals demand that we also ensure a commercial setting where the human resource base responds rapidly and efficiently to the demands of modern day business in a global environment.

In addition, as a nation bent on enhancing its trading capacity, we must be responsive to the growing population and the related increasing economic power, of Spanish speakers in the Americas.

2000 Census figures indicate that within the next decade, Spanish speakers will cross the 900 million mark in the Americas. As a result countries are clamoring to advertise in the Spanish-language media market, employees proficient in Spanish and English are being hired over equally qualified monolingual employees and already, trade talks are increasingly held, not in English, but in Spanish. Right here, at meetings of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) where I am Chairman of the Special Committee on Trade Development and

External Economic Relations, discussions are conducted primarily in Spanish. Those of us who wish to participate in English must utilize the interpreters.

Ladies and Gentlemen, 20 years ago it would have seemed unrealistic to imagine 34 countries from our region uniting to strengthen trade links. And yet this is exactly what is happening, with the onset of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Our region is meeting the demands of globalization head on, and as the front-runners to host the FTAA Headquarters, we must lead by example.

With 18 of the 34 countries in the FTAA citing Spanish as their first language, and the fact that Trinidad and Tobago benefits from over \$1 billion in trade from our Spanish speaking neighbors, it seems only fitting that we take steps to ensure that our citizens can survive and thrive in this new, increasingly bilingual environment.

As we increase our stature in the trade arena, develop further our links with sub-regional groups such as MERCOSUR, the potential opening of Cuba and the growing economic power of many countries

across Latin America, have inspired us to not only improve our proficiency in Spanish, but develop a competency at the national level which will place us ahead of the game when companies make crucial choices for business and investment.

Trade liberalisation and globalisation, with their inherent challenges and opportunities, are impacting all nations at the socio-cultural as well as economic levels. As countries develop even closer ties, eventually, not only trade demarcations, but slowly and surely, the importance of national and cultural boundaries will diminish. The world is changing rapidly around us, and we must be prepared to meet the new imperatives head on, to arm ourselves and most important of all, our children, with the skills needed to manage this new environment.

Today we celebrate a major step in our drive to meet the demands of globalisation and trade liberalization – the launch of the Spanish as the First Foreign Language Initiative in Trinidad and Tobago, and the establishment of the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish

(SIS), that will serve as the execution arm of this initiative, on behalf of the Cabinet appointed Steering Committee.

For those of you familiar with my Ministry, which is grounded in the world of bilateral and multi-lateral trade negotiations, business, commerce and industrial development, this project may seem to be a somewhat unfamiliar undertaking. But the demands of regional and international business and world trade ultimately drive its implementation and therefore make it a critical part of our mandate.

While this country remains a stalwart member of CARICOM and the English-speaking Caribbean, we consider this step to make Spanish our First Foreign Language as a recognition of our long-standing cultural connection to the Spanish language and Hispanic culture. This is grounded in our history as a colony of Spain for over 300 years, and of course from our geographic position a mere seven miles from Venezuela, as the crow flies.

One need only look to the names of our cities and districts to see Spanish is a highly visible element of life in Trinidad and Tobago: San

Fernando, Santa Cruz, Las Cuevas, Sangre Grande, San Juan and Diego Martin – just to name a few. The mountain range which inspired the name of our nation – La Trinidad – is an extension of the Andes on the South American continent.

These mountains and many of our rich natural resources – mineral and animal, are evidence of our South American connections. And indeed, the energy and passion of our people contains a strong similarity to that of our familial neighbors. Today there are many communities within our country which maintain their Hispanic roots – Lopinot, Arima, and Santa Cruz – come to mind immediately. Vast numbers of Trinidadians have Venezuelan relatives, are of cocopañyol heritage, or have lived “Down the Main” for a period of time. And of course, the most tangible evidence of our Latin roots is our beloved Christmas tradition - parang.

So close are we to the Americas, that many across the globe incorrectly assumed Spanish is our mother tongue. With the launch of this initiative, we will ensure that the answer to inquiries as to whether we speak Spanish will be “Sí.”

Already, senior executives throughout the private sector are saying “Sí” to Spanish. The TTMA and TIDCO report that trade visits to Latin American countries are resulting in greater interest in Spanish language programmes at home. The Centre for Language Learning at the University of the West Indies (UWI) reports increased enrollment in Spanish language classes – as do the Venezuelan Embassy, NIHERST and many private Spanish institutions and providers across the nation.

Many employment agencies, both locally and internationally, have reported a significant number of clients giving preference to persons competent in our First Foreign Language. The recently published UWI Institute of Business Corporate Confidence Index shows that 61% of executives indicated their companies would be recruiting within the next year. Job seekers already fluent in Spanish can use this capability as leverage in negotiating for higher salaries and/or benefit packages from employers.

Those of us that follow employment trends will remember that 15 to 20 years ago, prospective employees listing computer literacy on

their resumes were able to do the same. Those individuals who failed to notice the trend, today find themselves facing great difficulty in today's computer driven workplace.

While we are closing the technological gap, as a responsible government, we cannot allow a similar situation to challenge our citizens in the bilingual workplaces of the future. That is why we are launching SAFFL today – to contribute to the ongoing development of our nation.

Quite a number of departments within the Government have embarked on their own programs under this initiative. As the Ministry of Education has stated, their language instruction process is designed to ensure that a child born tomorrow will be exposed to Spanish during their primary school education. By the year 2020, we expect that all of our children would have completed Spanish language education at primary and secondary levels.

While this ensures there will be knowledge of the language, the SIS is mandated to ensure utility of that knowledge. Focusing on the public

and private sector, the Secretariat will serve as a resource, providing statistics on the practicality of having a Spanish proficient workforce, information on best practices in creating a Spanish learning environment in the workplace and helping companies explore the Spanish training options best suited to their needs.

Charged with the implementation and development of Spanish as the First Foreign Language in all spheres of our society, the SIS will be diligent in bringing this initiative to fruition. Already the Secretariat has been active – working to launch Spanish training programmes in Government Ministries.

In November of 2004 the Ministry of Tourism launched its programme. The Ministry of National Security's programme is currently being implemented and, with the help of the SIS, many others will follow within the next 12 months.

At the Ministry of Trade and Industry, signage in our offices is in both English and Spanish, and we have established Spanish language programs at different proficiency levels for staff. Documents sent to

Latin governments and agencies are translated into Spanish to facilitate better communication and emphasise cultural sensitivity, and our new Ministry corporate profile will be published in both languages.

To reinforce our Spanish language knowledge, at lunch times and after working hours, my staff play scrabble and other word games, read Spanish language magazines and generally engage in a range of activities which expose them to Hispanic culture. We recognize that language is a basic expression of culture, and so to reinforce knowledge of basic grammar, language rules and pronunciation, we emphasise that our staff experience some form of cultural emersion to enable fluency to develop. A critical aspect of this involves our Latin American air routes offered by BWIA, to Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, wherein we are encouraging staff members, and indeed all nationals to plan group trips to these nations to participate in local Spanish language emersion programs.

Ladies and Gentlemen, implementing a language program nationwide requires dedication at the individual level and support at the national

level. We encourage individuals, organizations and indeed communities to begin acquiring Spanish language skills, and assure you that the SIS is here to assist in any way possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at this time, it is my privilege to officially launch the Spanish As the First Foreign Language initiative.

I thank you.