

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening, and thank you for inviting me to address the Annual Long Service Awards Function of BWIA West Indies Airways Limited. An award function is always a valuable exercise, since it allows us to reflect on and celebrate our achievements, give recognition where it is due, and to look positively towards the future. Tonight, BWIA West Indies Limited (or BWee as you are affectionately called) is living this process, as you celebrate the contributions of 225 employees, who have given long and dedicated service to the airline over the last 15 to 40 years.

Since its inception some 64 years ago, BWIA has forged an irreversible bond between the Caribbean Community and the major international destinations with large Caribbean populations, e.g. New York, London and Toronto. This airline transports not just people and cargo, but the hopes and dreams of an entire region, creating important linkages between peoples of different cultures and helping to preserve familial and national ties. Indeed, Bwee is such an indelible part of the West Indian psyche that the sight of a

Bwee plane at an international terminal has brought tears to the eyes of many a Caribbean person.

In the past decade, BWIA has undergone two major corporate reengineering exercises – developing on both occasions, clear visions and strategies for maintaining the airline as the carrier of choice in the Caribbean and also for ensuring its commercial viability. The fact that 225 employees have been able to participate in those exercises, and subsequently to manage successfully the processes of change is testament to their leadership and managerial capabilities.

Tonight's event is also a valuable mechanism for sending a clear message to your major stakeholders – business and tourism travelers, suppliers and importers and exporters – that excellence and sound leadership are esteemed principles by which you operate. If you continue on the path of success on which you have embarked, your efforts would be more than rewarded. I wish therefore, to join your Board in congratulating those who are being

recognized for their commitment to BWIA during the best of times and more importantly, during the more difficult periods.

After over 60 years of existence, BWIA has at its disposal a substantial pool of expertise. The airline is therefore well prepared to meet vigorously the challenges posed by the competitive aviation environment and the opportunities presented by the recent decision of Government to redefine the airline as a strategic asset. BWIA is a key element of the strategy to promote the country's non-oil exports in new markets – whether in CARICOM, Latin America and outside this hemisphere.

Your airline has had a record of consistent service of which you can be unreservedly proud. It has remained a reassuring, constant and formidable market force despite the presence of many other competitors at different points in time and I expect it will bring this same level of dynamism in the servicing of the new markets thereby assisting in the marketing of goods and services of Trinidad and Tobago.

Global economic trends have indicated that the demand for reliable and continuous transportation links will continue unabated for many years. Enhanced growth rates in major sectors – energy, tourism and manufacturing – will impact positively on passenger and freight business. BWIA therefore must provide critical support to these sectors if our objective of making Trinidad and Tobago the transportation and trans-shipment hub for the Caribbean and region is to be realized and if we are to successfully exploit our strategic geographic location. Indeed we are also aware that the establishment of the headquarters of the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago depends critically on a reliable air transportation system.

In light of these considerations, Government made a determination that BWIA West Indies Airways Limited was a strategic asset. As a result, following the finalisation of the rights issue earlier this year, the Government now has almost full control of the airline and has been taking steps to put the airline on a viable basis, including cash injections, fleet rationalisation,

aggressive marketing and the commercialization of its technical repair and overhaul centres.

Despite the well-known difficulties facing all airlines, whether from increased security costs in the aftermath of the 9-11 catastrophe, or from higher fuel costs stemming from the pick-up in world economic activity and the persistence of certain geopolitical concerns, BWIA has a bright future in the context of the generally upbeat economic conditions prevailing in this country for now and the foreseeable future.

Our economic and social agenda is set against a background of favourable global economic performance and strong macro and micro economic factors. Underpinning this improved performance has been a strong upturn in global trade, and favourable financial market conditions. Our economy registered its tenth consecutive year of expansion, growing by 4.1 percent in 2003 compared with growth of 2.7 percent in 2002. This solid growth has been non-inflationary and job-creating, with inflation averaging 3.8 percent in

2003 and the unemployment rate averaging 10.5 percent for the same period.

The outlook indicates that over the next three years we will enter a period of even more dynamic growth. In **2005**, real GDP is expected to grow by **6.7 percent** rising sharply to about **8.0-9.0 percent** in **2006** and stabilizing around **5.0-6.0 percent** thereafter.

We expect that growth in **2006** will be fuelled by the coming on stream of a fourth LNG Train and several additional energy projects including a new methanol plant and a DRI Plant by end-**2005**. Further down the road, the construction of an aluminum smelter and accompanying power generation facilities are planned.

In the medium-term, non-energy growth will derive considerable stimulus from an acceleration in construction activity, infrastructure development and private sector projects. Within this general framework, Tobago is also benefiting from substantial investment in tourism projects.

The country's ability to further capitalize on these positive economic developments depends in no small measure on the establishment of efficient, or rather, superior transportation links particularly in light of the strategic positioning of this country as a trans-shipment hub and a regional financial centre.

I wish to highlight that while the achievement of developmental objectives requires a range of technical and financial prerequisites, it also requires the sound expertise and dedication of a dynamic human resource base represented by the individuals who will be receiving awards this evening. I therefore wish to extend my sincere appreciation to the employees being honoured at this long service awards ceremony. Your years of unstinting dedication have undoubtedly served to establish BWIA West Indies Airways Limited as the regional airline of choice. I am in no doubt that these awardees would leave a legacy of efficiency and effectiveness within the national airline which is an important prerequisite for further development.

I thank you.