



UNIVERSITY of MAURITIUS

**Address by Dr Louis Jean Claude Autrey
Chancellor of the University Of Mauritius
On the occasion of the Celebrations for the
50th Anniversary of the Independence of Mauritius!
International Conference of the Mauritian Academic Diaspora 2018
20, 21 and 22 February 2018
Tuesday 20 February 2018 at 9.30 am**

Honourable Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, Prime Minister,
Minister of Home Affairs, External Communications and National Development Unit,
Minister of Finance and Economic Development
Honourable Nandcoomar Bodha, Minister of Infrastructure, National Development Unit,
Land Transport & Shipping
Honourable Ministers and Members of the National Assembly
Excellences of the Diplomatic Corps
Professor Dhanjay JHURRY, Vice-Chancellor, University of Mauritius
Eminent Guests of our Diaspora
Pro Vice Chancellors, Dean of Faculties & University Colleagues and Students
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

On behalf of the University of Mauritius and in my own name, I would like to wish you a very warm welcome. Let me, Honourable Prime Minister, at the outset, express to you our sincere thanks and appreciation for having taking time to be with us for the International Conference of the Mauritian Academic Diaspora 2018. This shows your commitment to matters relating to the Mauritian Diaspora and to our activities.

The University of Mauritius has thought fit in the framework of the celebrations of the 50th Anniversary of Independence to organize this Conference. We would like to convey our gratitude to the eminent scientists too many to name from Australia, Canada, China, France, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and USA, who have accepted our invitation in spite of their busy schedules and are among us this morning.

This is not the first conference concerning Diaspora which is organized by the University. You may recall that in July 2006 the International Symposium entitled '*Pa Bliye Nou Rasinn or Afin que nos racines ne se perdent or let us not forget our roots*' took place in this very auditorium. It was a resounding success. In November 2015 the University was a major player in the international conference organized by the Mahatma Gandhi Institute on the theme *Mauritian Diaspora in Question: Trajectories and Connections*. References are made to these events to show that the Mauritian Diaspora is a matter of importance to the University and of course to our country.

Although the word of Diaspora in our local context is rather new, yet we all here issue from Diasporas. This aspect was very well analysed by Mr. Jean Claude de l'Estrac, Journalist,

Historian and Diplomat in his presentation entitled: *D'où nous venons?* at the 2006 Symposium. Mr. de l'Estrac went over three centuries of Mauritian multiculturalism and concluded I quote: *Nous venons de cette immense aspiration à la liberté* Unquote.

Ever since our Island was colonised, Mauritians have been leaving for other shores. One of the first angible examples of our Diaspora is certainly Simon van der Stel born here in 1639 who became the first Governor of the Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Throughout the colonial times, our countrymen have left Mauritius for other countries and their movement was in many instances related to the sugar industry. Thus Mauritians developed the sugar industry in Australia in the 1860s then over throughout Africa and in what were then faraway places like Brazil and Hawaii. We can speak may be of a sweet Diaspora.

But movement was not restricted to these countries. It extended for example to Europe and was successful if we take as two examples: Jean Marie Le Clezio, Nobel Prize laureate in Literature and Joël de Rosnay, World renown scientist both born to Mauritian parents. I refer to them because honorary doctorates in literature and science in this University were awarded to them and they were also present at the 2006 Symposium.

The word Mauritian Diaspora became a reality with the mass migration of our countrymen as from 1960. In this context, the source of reference is the book of Mrs. Monique Dinan present in the room this morning entitled *Une Île Éclatée analyse de l'émigration mauricienne de 1960-1982*. In fact, Mrs. Dinan has extended her analysis to 2005, therefore covering some 45 years. According to the author, one must distinguish three phases in the saga of the Mauritian Diaspora. The first one from 1960-1980 which was dominated by a real migration with no return when 66 000 left, the second from 1980-2000 some 46 000 left was also on a large scale but dominated by work contracts of fixed duration and the third one as from 2000 concerned principally professionals like Engineers, IT experts, nurses, doctors, teachers, etc., who could find jobs in European countries who needed to replace their ageing population. There has been two other types of migrations consisting of our students who did not come back home after their studies, I would say unfortunately and also an undetermined number of women who married foreigners, especially in France, Italy and Switzerland. What was known as *marriage par correspondance*. Number wise some 114 000 Mauritians left between 1960 and 2005. The number is probably higher. It is estimated at 120 000 and overall the figure quoted for the Diaspora is some 200 000 because many did not reveal that they are migrating compared to our population of 1.3 M. These figures are indicative certainly of a brain drain but in fact indicate also the potential that our Diaspora represents for our country and therefore we must spare no effort to have them to put their expertise to serve our country by coming back and settle here, by having exchange programmes with our institutions and with the advent of advanced technologies to communicate with our students and professionals here for capacity building. The areas go beyond academia and fields are of interest are very wide-ranging from A to Z: A for Anthropology and artificial intelligence, B for Blockchain and Biotechnology to Z for Zoology. It is pertinent to emphasise that there are four schemes of the Mauritius Research Council under which proposals submitted for funding consideration, can include members of the diaspora.

While we are encouraging the Diaspora members to come back, we must stress that this is already a reality for many, for example, those who migrated and retired and wanting to spend the rest of their lives here taking into account the advantages of the quality of life of our country. The number of those who have come back is not available but there are a quite a few. In a recent film entitled *Les enfants de l'exil* or Children of Exile Alain Gordon-Gentil,

Writer, Film Producer and Journalist, present in the room this morning, has made a vivid account our Diaspora in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Australia, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Switzerland and Canada. This film is not only about the motivation for leaving but is the first tangible testimony on record of that for coming back. If you have an opportunity I would certainly recommend that you read the book of Mrs. Dinan and watch the film of Mr. Gordon-Gentil, copies of which are available in our libraries.

We must concede that there have been at times apprehensions of those among us who have stayed back about the return of the Diaspora. Personally I think today 50 years after Independence, the Mauritian mind set has evolved and we have enough confidence to welcome the return of those who can contribute to our social, economic and environmental development. On the other hand, as it is generally believed that members of the Diaspora are quite demanding with their countries of origins in term of achievements and international standing before engaging, we will have to take steps to meet their expectations and already Government has provided in the last budget various incentives to encourage our Diaspora to put their competences to the service of our nation. The Honourable Prime Minister will probably make reference to this in his speech. The organisation of other Diasporas including that of India with its Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) could stir us in our ambition to establish a framework of our own. It has been said that to have a Diaspora the communities who have been dispersed should have kept for three generations at least, the sense of their ethnic and geographical origins. We have reached that stage.

In conclusion, we must reckon that those who chose to go away were very courageous, they had to confront difficult conditions including discrimination and racketeering, many did several jobs to near exhaustion for the welfare of their families and in the end they succeeded because of their tenacity and their greatest pride is undoubtedly their adaptation and the success, especially academic of their children. They have been loyal to their country of adoption but have kept a Mauritian soul. This is what Novelist Ananda Devi has to say: I quote: *Je pense de plus en plus lorsque je reviens à Maurice à quel point j'ai la sensation d'être chez moi, d'une manière vraiment viscérale. Même en entendant le vent, j'ai le sentiment qu'il n'as pas le même son, la même sensation qu'ailleurs. Une sensation d'être à ma place. Je ne suis pas malheureuse ailleurs... ici je me ressource, ici je reprends mes repères.* Unquote

When we visit Mauritian communities overseas, we are overwhelmed by their interest in what goes on in Mauritius, especially politics and our everyday life. How they appreciate speaking creole, sing and dance the *Sega Mauricien* and small things from the country including *fromage kraft* even if this is not Mauritian but of course Mauritian delicacies: farata, poisson sale, archard, napolitain cakes, etc...

When we look at the programme of this conference we realise what has been achieved by those of the Diaspora who will be making presentations and also by others who are present. They have impressive CVs and the sophistication of their work and its diversity illustrates what the Diaspora has achieved 50 years after Independence in academia and scientific research. It is probably one of the most advanced scientific conferences that we have organised in this auditorium. Our eminent guests can be sources of inspiration, stimulation and encouragement to our students and academics. After brain drain we will certainly welcome brain gain. The more so that a recent report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD published in the March 2017 Edition of the Harvard Business Review has indicated that we are the fifth country most affected by brain drain.

I wish our guests and participants a very successful week and I have no doubt the broad objectives of this conference which are the sharing of professional experiences and discussions about future collaboration will be met.

I would like to congratulate and to thank the Vice Chancellor Professor Dhanjay Jhurry and his colleagues, members of the Organising Committee for setting up such a wonderful event which augurs well for the development of scientific research at the University and will contribute significantly to our quest for innovation which is vital to our country.

Finally, on a personal note, I am very close to the Diaspora: my brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles and aunts and friends have left for Australia, Canada and elsewhere. I have more relatives outside Mauritius and I must confess that I am happy of having chosen to stay here. I was 20 at the time of Independence, the prospects were not the best ones and yet the country has offered me the opportunities which have allowed me to fulfil my aspirations and my ideals.

Long live Mauritius and its Diaspora!

Honourable Prime Minister

Ladies and Gentlemen

I thank you for your attention

Jean Claude Autrey
Chancellor