

Address

by the Hon. Miss Agatha Barbara,

Minister of Education and Culture, Malta

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour and a pleasure to have been invited to deliver the opening address to this Commonwealth Seminar on "Youth and Development in Malta". I personally, and also on behalf of the Government of Malta, wish to offer a most cordial welcome to the distinguished members of the Commonwealth Secretariat team and sincerely hope that their short stay in our hospitable country will be pleasant and enjoyable in every respect. I also wish to extend a heartfelt welcome to local participants: speakers and representatives of our youth organizations.

As many of you may be aware, the origins of this Seminar lay in a proposal, advanced by the British Government, at the Meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government, in January, 1969. The aim of this Seminar, like that of the three previous Regional Seminars organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat and held in far-flung Commonwealth centres during the past three years, is to pool the thinking and experiences of persons actively engaged in youth work, and to produce a report which will provide part of an in-put to the forthcoming Commonwealth Meeting of Ministers responsible for youth matters.

The Malta Seminar, which is being launched this morning, thus marks a final phase of the series of Seminars, which will culminate in a Commonwealth Meeting of Ministers later on this year. This Malta Seminar also marks a departure in this series of Seminars, in that youths are not merely being discussed by adults, but are themselves participating in the discussions. I would like to put on record our sincere appreciation for deciding on involving our youths in this important preparatory phase of the whole exercise, for I strongly believe that isolating youths, and discussing them from a lofty perspective, far from provides a panacea to their problems; one should attempt to integrate them closely in society, by providing avenues for their involvement and

commitment.

At the risk of overplaying my role, I am going to give in to a strong temptation to express some of my views and beliefs on matters related to the theme of this Seminar, which for too many years have been a source of anxiety to me; I do sincerely hope that this will in no way prejudice the trend of the talks, discussions and deliberations during this Seminar.

I qualify the nature of youth problems by eliciting a key-word, "complex", from the principal theme of this Seminar: "A comprehensive review of the whole complex of youth problems". Youth indeed presents a complex of unbounded dimensions: it is an age of transition - a state of flux in a no-man's land; it is a phase of contradictions ---- of inherent conflicts.

Youth is in conflict with itself. The discrepancies in the stages of his development, on different personality-levels, precipitate youth into a morass of instinct-conflicts. Moreover, youth is required to undertake the exercise of responsibility before it has necessarily developed to an appropriate stage emotionally and morally, thus facing new arduous tasks without being provided with the necessary tools for their accomplishment. Youth is idealistic in a world of subtle, callous corruption; it abhors the hypocritic and double standards of the adult world. It is ambitious and energetic, yet frustrated because the outlets to its talents are quite limited, because thwarted ambitions conceive disillusion and revolt.

Youth is in conflict with society, which often treats youths as children, and at the same time expects them to behave like adults. The clash in the mentality between generations - the currently much-banded about "generation gap" - is in fact a perennial complaint. I think Seneca used to harp on it. Of course, the contemporary gap in educational attainment between parents and children is giving a new dimension to this social phenomenon.

Youth is also in conflict with its future. This is perhaps the worst conflict, as it presents the unknown, the mysterious, and the completely disarming. The spectre of a blind alley on leaving school must be faced to be fully appreciated. The problem of unemployment among youths, enmeshed as it is in social factors and economic pressures, has become urgent and explosive.

Among the conglomerate of problems which my Government has inherited from the outgoing administration, less than a year ago, the problem of unemployment among youths ranks supreme. Our efforts to radically re-construct the existing indiscriminate structure of our labour forces will inevitably protract this problem, however hard and urgently we are dedicating all our resources to its solution. The recent establishment by my Government of the Emergency Labour Corps is a practical, beneficial step in this direction. The imminent introduction of Trade Schools is another feature of my Government's programme of vocational training for potential school-leavers, who otherwise would join the ranks of unemployed. With this same scope, we also intend to extend school-leaving age to the age of 16. Other activities in this direction include: aligning training to industrial and other economic needs, embarking on serious, scientific manpower surveys; a campaign aimed at changing parents' attitudes to trade and technical education by making them come to see that there is nothing degrading in manual work.

Modern youth is beset by highly exceptional environmental circumstances, unknown to his predecessors: all-round progress; mass communications; universal secondary education, resulting in an intensification of the rat-race in the employment arena; a fast life, in which reaching normally phased-out maturation is quite a feat; mechanisation, undermining the "élan vital" of youth; an overdose of free-time, accompanied by a lack of preparation and provision for recreation and leisure; the changing patterns of society and of the family, and the painful emergence from the traditional way of life; the impact of the newly-acquired political independence, reflected in a quest for independence and self-responsibility in a society which provides very little opportunities for their exercise; the crumbling image of erstwhile authority; the sense of rejection towards the establishment, often verging upon expressions of revolt (drop-outs, vandalism, delinquency and so on), taunting authority in all its forms; religious apathy; the threat of permissiveness in the close wake of the new morality of situation-ethics; the new outlook on sex ... the list seems endless. Little wonder youth provides a universal, disturbing, social phenomenon of massive and urgent problems.

I leave the elaboration of the aforesaid to you. I only wish to add, with a sense of shame, that one has to put on record the unhappy fact, despite my Government's efforts to remedy it, that our youths are not yet entrusted with the right

to vote in electing their Government before they reach the age of 21; the vestiges of centuries of colonial experiences are still curbing our youths from a relaxed, active participation in politics.

This is indeed, as is speciously contended, 'the era of the teenager'; but the big question is whether this is an asset or a liability to our youths. Many a youth problem is not necessarily a youth problem; it is more an adult problem, and putting youth in the dock is neither fair nor conducive to a solution. I do not wish this remark to depict me as unduly lenient with our youths. In fact, I am a great believer in discipline and in dedicated application to one's duties and responsibilities among youths, which I fervently consider to be treasured qualities and not to be regarded as some sort of necessary evils.

These are some of the scattered thoughts, which a loose sally of the mind prompted to me, on being invited to give the opening address to this Youth Seminar. I do hope they serve to provoke discussion. Indeed I am confident that this gathering will hear a more systematised and expert exposé of all these points and others besides. We are fortunate in having speakers of wide experience, gained through many years of dedicated interest and work in the field of youth services. I am confident that their contribution to this Seminar will stimulate discussion and duly help in the fulfilment of its aims. It is also my earnest hope that this Seminar will share the enthusiasm displayed in the three Regional Seminars.

Before concluding my introductory address, and request you to proceed with your work, I wish to make some final observations. This Seminar will serve little purpose if it comes up with more analytical and academical statements and very readable reports, but stops short of producing practical and politically workable action. My wish is that it extends its fields, beyond mere abstractions of the technicalities of problems, towards a rationalised, humane treatment, centring on youths as human beings and not as cogs in the social machine. I would hasten to add that local speakers are expected to express themselves without any inhibition, as only in this way, through facing the issues honestly and squarely, through free and frank exchange of ideas and experiences, may one come to lay bare and tackle forcefully the core of the delicate matters embraced in the theme in hand.

Wishing you well in your work over the next three days,
I now have the pleasure and privilege to invite Dr Maraj to be the
Chairman of this Seminar.