



EASTERN CARIBBEAN SUPREME COURT LAW YEAR ADDRESS 2022



*'The ECSC: "Reimagining the Justice System
in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond"'*

Address by:

Her Ladyship,

The Hon. Dame Janice M. Pereira, DBE, LL.D

Chief Justice

DATE: Tuesday 11th January 2022

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- Justices of Appeal, Judges and Masters of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court;
- Their Excellencies, Governors General and Their Excellencies, Heads of State of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Honourable Heads of Government of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Retired Judges of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court;
- Honourable Attorneys General of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Honourable Ministers of Government of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Chief and Senior Magistrates and Magistrates of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Honourable Speakers of the Houses of Assembly and Presidents of the Senate of each of the OECS Member States and Territories.
- Honourable Leaders of the Opposition of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Members of Parliament of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- His Excellency, Dr. Didicus Jules, Director General, OECS Commission;
- Directors of Public Prosecutions of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Solicitors General of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Mrs. Michelle John-Theobalds, Chief Registrar and
Mr. Carlos Cameron Michel, Deputy Chief Registrar of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court;
Registrars and Deputy and Assistant Registrars of the High Court of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Mr. Gregory Girard, Court Administrator of the Court's Headquarters and Mr. Francis Letang, Deputy Court Administrator of the Court's Headquarters; and Court Administrators of each of the High Court Offices of the OECS Member States and Territories;

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- Ms. Jean Dyer, President of the OECS Bar Association;
- Presidents of the constituent Bar Associations of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Learned Members of the Inner Bar and Utter Bar of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Members of the Clergy;
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
- Commissioners of Police and Police Officers of each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Directors/Heads of Correctional Facilities in each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Staff of the Court's Headquarters and Court Offices in each of the OECS Member States and Territories;
- Distinguished Guests;
- Students;
- Citizens and residents of the Eastern Caribbean;

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Good morning.

Another year has swiftly come and gone bringing us to the beginning of a new law year of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court. It is an honour and indeed a pleasure to address you once more for the official opening of the law year 2022. I take this opportunity to welcome you all to this Special Sitting and to also extend best wishes to you for a new year filled with much promise. I pray that as we embark upon this new year, God will bestow his richest blessings upon us all and upon our Member States and Territories.

It has long been tradition for each Member State and Territory of the Court to host, by rotation, a Special Sitting marking the opening of a new Law year at which the main feature is the delivery of the Chief Justice's address, with local gatherings in a physical courtroom. However, this was upended by the advent of the Covid 19 pandemic in March 2020 making physical interaction unsafe and prompting many health protocols to be implemented and gathering physically unsafe. This led us to forego the Special Sitting which was slated to take place in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in January 2021 in the traditional manner with persons gathering physically. But all was not lost. We had to reimagine how we would execute the commemoration of the opening of the law year in 2021. We chose to do so in an unprecedented way up until that time - by means of a virtual Special Sitting production. That virtual Special Sitting enabled us to capture a much wider audience as it was streamed via online social media platforms across the region and indeed across the world. It was also aired on UWI-TV throughout the region. By all accounts, it was a resounding success!

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This year's ceremonial opening of the new law year was slated to take place in the beautiful Territory of the Virgin Islands. I was looking forward with much anticipation to returning to my homeland for this occasion and because it is the last occasion on which I shall enjoy the honour of doing so as your Chief Justice. But, here we are, almost two years later still within the grip of the pandemic. Just as we were beginning to settle into living with COVID-19 given the availability of vaccines and better knowledge of mitigation measures, a new variant has emerged which has thrown the global COVID-19 situation into uncertainty yet again.

This unfolding of events tells us that we are certainly not out of the woods. We must therefore continue to observe all health protocols and remain vigilant as we go about our lives.

And so, once more, with the assistance of UWI-TV, and the use of modern social media platforms, I am privileged to address you virtually on the commencement of our 2022 Law year.

Crises should never be viewed as all bad. It is in such times that our most creative and imaginative thoughts lead to positive action. Over the last year, the Court moved from simply managing the COVID-19 pandemic to developing new and innovative ways of improving the justice system as a whole, in light of the deficiencies laid bare by the pandemic. It is the case that the pandemic has created considerable challenges for the administration of justice across the globe, and indeed without exception, for the functioning of our courts. It has forced us as a Court to see and engage in the virtual world, and in you redefining your view of courts no longer being seen so much as a place but more so as a service.

The Court, and all of us along with it, were pushed into survival mode - requiring it to transform its operations at an even faster pace. In fact, just over the past year, we have seen the use of digital platforms and other innovations becoming significant and essential features of our court system. This is for many a much-welcomed transformation.

At this stage, the essential question is what will our justice system resemble in the next 5 or even 10 years? It is, I think, fair to say that as COVID-19 lingers on, and even beyond the pandemic, digitally driven courts will be critical to the continued administration of justice. Courts around the world have arrived at the same conclusion: That digitally operated courts and services are here to stay – even when the pandemic, hopefully, becomes a distant memory. Our economic survival requires that we adapt and take full advantage of the ICT revolution. There is no turning back.

In looking towards the future, and in taking onboard what COVID-19 has taught us, the Court now seeks to implement new and improved measures to ensure the continuity of its work and the dispensation of justice in and beyond the COVID-19 era. This in turn will involve continued reforms of existing processes and procedures, all aimed at improving the Court’s accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of justice in a post-COVID-19 world. Accordingly, a fitting theme for this Law Year Address is “The ECSC: Reimagining the Justice System in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond”.

The theme reflects the Court’s sense of duty to the people whom it serves on a daily basis. Indeed, recognising that a modern and responsive judicial system is at the core of all social and economic development, the Court must constantly innovate and reimagine its modus operandi in order to maintain its commitment to providing ‘effective and efficient access to an independent and accountable system of justice’ for the benefit of all persons within our Member States and Territories. It is, as the renowned philosopher Francis Bacon said, ‘if we do not maintain justice, justice will not maintain us’.

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We have all had to become comfortable with the concept of the judiciary not being a visual building or place but indeed a service being provided - in many respects invisibly - from wherever the place. In advancing our commitment to you, the citizens and residents of the OECS, it is important to first provide you with an update on the work of the ECSC over the last year and the direction being pursued for a reimagined justice system of the future.

I begin by giving a snapshot of the work of the Court over the last year. In the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the closing of borders and national lockdowns, the Court remained as busy as ever with a heavy case load by continuing to provide the needed access to the justice system, which was achieved mainly through virtual operations. As an example, at the appellate level, there were 419 appeals filed in 2020. The Court of Appeal heard 351 appeals during full court sittings and a further 437 matters in chamber hearings. The Court of Appeal also delivered 66 written judgments, and 258 oral decisions, amounting to 324 decisions delivered in total. These figures are on par with the pre-pandemic data from 2019. A much more comprehensive report on the workings of the court at the High Court and Magisterial Court levels is contained in our annual report which will be available on the Court's website. I encourage you to read it so as to gain a deeper appreciation of the Court's work at all levels.

EXPANSION OF THE E-LITIGATION PORTAL

At this juncture, you may be asking yourself 'how is the court able to continue dealing with cases?' I am proud to say that this is being achieved largely through the Court, practitioners and litigants embracing the use of the E-Litigation Portal and other ICT technologies.

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Indeed, a large part of the move to become a digitally driven court is the full implementation of the ECSC E-Litigation Portal. Last year, the Court achieved a significant milestone – the completion of the first phase of implementation of the Portal for all 9 Member States and Territories. Just as recently as October 2021, we officially welcomed to the Portal the final two Member States of the Commonwealth of Dominica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. This was preceded by the welcoming of the Member State of Grenada in June 2021 - making good on our promise to link all the courts across the Court's jurisdiction digitally.

While this milestone is of even greater significance in the current COVID-climate, we believe it is essential for the future of the Court in what is no doubt a technologically driven world.

Thus, our implementation of the Portal does not end here. We are now embarking on the second phase of our rollout of the Portal. This phase will see an expansion in the types of matters filed and managed on the Portal to include High Court Family and Criminal Matters. I have no doubt that this expansion will be a much-welcomed development – leading to speedier resolution of cases and greater costs savings to many more court users. Additionally, the second phase is particularly important in light of the adverse impact that COVID-19 has had on the criminal justice system in the OECS - a topic on which I will say more shortly. It is my hope that this second phase will begin to take shape in the upcoming months.

I am also pleased to announce that plans are currently underway to reimagine the justice system at the Magistrates' Court level. Many may not realise that the Magistrates' Courts across the length and breadth of the OECS deal with the majority of court cases.

We must therefore never discount the significant role that the Magistrates' Courts play in the administration of justice in our region. As such, efforts are ongoing to expand the Portal to accommodate matters filed in the Magistrates' Court during the second phase of implementation.

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To this end, rules are being drafted for e-filing and e-serving of complaints at the Magistrates' Court level and to otherwise guide the use of the Portal in a manner best suited to the summary nature of the Magistrates' Court. We are also making provision for the conduct of remote hearings for magisterial matters – which in the Member State of Grenada and the Territory of Anguilla require immediate legislative amendment in order for this to be possible. This simply means that those Members States and Territories which do not yet have video links established in their Magistrates' Courts are encouraged to be quick in putting these in place.

I recognise of course that the Magistrates' Courts too have not been spared by the COVID-19 pandemic, with their operations having been severely hampered over the last almost two years. It is therefore my hope that these plans to bring the Magistrates' Court onto the Portal come to fruition sooner rather than later. The simple truth is that we must never become tired in our quest to widen and deepen the avenues of accessibility, and accountability for the benefit of our societies by re-imagining how these goals may be achieved in times of crisis with enduring benefits far beyond.

CONDUCT OF REMOTE HEARINGS

The Court has also managed to deal with its caseload over the past year through conducting many of its sittings remotely. By all accounts, remote hearings have worked well for the Court of Appeal, which only missed one of its scheduled sittings at the very onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. User-friendly video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom, coupled with the E-Litigation Portal, have enabled our courts to transition fairly smoothly to the conduct of remote hearings - the Civil and Commercial Divisions of the High Court in particular were very much open for business. Criminal courts have also been using digital platforms and prison video links to conduct case management conferences and bail hearings.

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Some Member States and Territories have been able to use a blended approach of in-person attendance and virtual platforms for the conduct of trials for certain offences where appropriate. While remote hearings have indeed proved to be quite useful in the COVID-climate, there are some shortcomings which require more attention.

Going forward, we hope to fine-tune the conduct of remote court hearings. Quite apart from the challenge of maintaining the solemnity of court proceedings, one of the concerns raised by members of the Bar and the Bench is that of ensuring the integrity of oral evidence given by witnesses from an ‘out of court’ or remote location. It is critical that measures be put in place to ensure the integrity of evidence given remotely so as to minimise witness coaching or other forms of witness tampering.

The duty lies on a judicial officer, as part of their case management powers, to be satisfied that the directions given for the conduct of remote hearings including the location from which a witness can give evidence satisfactorily address these and other concerns which may impact the quality of evidence given in a matter. One measure being contemplated for the purpose of giving the Court more effective control and monitoring of the process, is to designate rooms at the High Court from which witnesses can suitably give evidence, and in respect of witnesses overseas by identifying a suitable designated and neutral venue for the taking of evidence.

Courts across the globe including those in the United Kingdom have implemented such measures and it has enjoyed tremendous success. It is my hope that this Court will also see the expanded use of these measures.

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EMERGENCY MEASURES PRACTICE DIRECTION

Our region is particularly susceptible to natural disasters such as hurricanes and volcanic eruptions. Added to those is the likelihood of a pandemic. It is well known that in the midst of the current pandemic, our Member State Saint Vincent & the Grenadines experienced the eruption of the La Soufriere volcano. We thought it fit to have in place an emergency plan for enabling a measure of continued court operations. And so, in April 2021 we revoked the COVID-19 Emergency Measures Practice Direction No. 5 of 2020 and issued the ECSC Emergency Measures Practice Direction No. 1 of 2021. This new Practice Direction is broader in scope than its predecessor and seeks to regulate the practice and procedure of a court which has been affected by a situation, occurrence or disaster. This includes Acts of God, force majeure or any other event, deemed by a Member State or Territory to be an emergency within that Member State or Territory, which impacts the operations of the court.

This Practice Direction also contains provisions which permit the location from which a Judge, Master, or Registrar conducts a remote hearing to be deemed a court for the purpose of conducting court proceedings. What this means is this: a judge physically in one Member State or Territory may preside over any matter being litigated in another Member State or Territory. For obvious reasons, this feature makes assigning judicial officers to hear matters in other Member States or Territories, coupled with the use of digital files and records, quite easy. In many instances, the need for physical travel at great expense and lost time has been considerably lessened. It has proven to be essential to the operations of our Court given its supra-national character – occupying, as it does, a single judicial space across 9 Member States and Territories which are separated by water. It is therefore safe to say that increased reliance on ICT and related measures will inevitably remain a key feature of a reimagined justice system of the future.

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I take this opportunity to urge governments to take steps if not already undertaken, to digitise other records such as deeds, instruments relating to land transactions, and records relating to civil status, in ways which allow for greater security and retrievability thus reducing the serious losses which may be wrought by natural disasters while at the same time building overall efficiency.

INTRODUCTION OF CRIMINAL MEDIATION REGIME

While many may think that the Court's quest to reimagine the justice system will be solely through ICT, this is not so. In my opening of the law year address last year, you may recall that I reported on our efforts to promote and reengineer court-connected mediation with a re-issued Court-Connected Mediation Practice Direction. The new Practice Direction has facilitated improved access to justice, particularly for unrepresented parties and litigants. To date, our Court-Connected Mediation has been entirely focused on civil matters, but I am now pleased to indicate that we are putting in place a framework to introduce a regime for mediation in appropriate criminal matters. This, we hope, will broaden the scope of mediation as a dispute resolution tool and help to propel it to the forefront as part of our strategy in reducing case backlogs at every level of the justice system.

REFORM OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

I wish to focus a bit now on the Criminal Division of the Court. There is no question that the pandemic has been devastating to the criminal justice system in the OECS. Jury trials have been stalled in many of our Member States and Territories due mostly to our inability to provide the required physical distancing protocols for a jury in many of our courtrooms. In fact, due to the COVID-climate, the High Court in Member States such as the Commonwealth of Dominica has had to vacate all criminal trials for the period September to December 2021.

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We also remain mindful of further disruptions which may occur in this new year. It simply remains the case that many of our courtrooms are too small and not fit for purpose. COVID-19 has exacerbated the situation. There has been an increase in the number of persons on remand in already overcrowded prisons. This does not bode well for any state and has serious implications for the maintenance and promotion of the Rule of Law and indeed the peace and security of us all. It is disheartening and quite troubling when those accused of inflicting harm and those who have suffered harm find common ground in lamenting the seeming interminable wait for justice. It cannot be gainsaid that the criminal justice system is in dire need of robust reform.

As I expressed in my last law year address, the time is ripe for our governments to assist the judiciary by including in their legislative agendas criminal justice reform measures such as provision for the implementation of judge-alone criminal trials for specific case types within the context of the constitutionally guaranteed right to a fair trial. This mode of trial has been tried and tested in other courts in our region. Further, when one considers the plethora of criminal offences triable by a magistrate, there can in my view be no compelling or objectively reasoned opposition to its implementation. Taking such measures would go a long way toward reducing the backlog of criminal cases in the OECS - with no adverse effects on the fairness of the trial process.

I also wish to commend the efforts of the Government of Saint Lucia which is in the process of drafting legislation to put such measures in place. I urge other Member States and Territories to capitalise on much of the groundwork done in other Member States and Territories who are more advanced in these legislative reform processes as we all seek to improve the safety, security and by extension the economic well-being of our sub region.

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Another measure Governments may wish to adopt, short of abolishing the jury system altogether, is legislative provision for smaller jury panels. Having judge-alone trials or trials with reduced jury panels will have many benefits, including decreasing the expenditure associated with operating a jury system which ultimately inures to the benefit of the public purse while boosting efficiency, accountability and, importantly, public confidence in the justice system. The criminal justice system cannot remain at a standstill because of COVID. We must find ways to administer justice despite COVID. I therefore take this opportunity once more to call on the Heads of Government of the OECS to seriously consider the necessary and urgent legislative reform which will aid the courts in the continued delivery of justice, lest justice takes flight. We all know that economic growth and criminality cannot co exist.

DELAY IN PRODUCTION OF TRANSCRIPTS

Another deficiency made more acute by the COVID-19 pandemic is the undue delay in the production of transcripts of proceedings across the Member States and Territories. In presiding over the Court of Appeal, I observe that far too many civil and criminal matters must be adjourned due to the unavailability of transcripts. In fact, many persons who have launched criminal appeals ultimately end up completing their sentences before their appeal is heard due to the lack of transcripts. In such cases, the Crown often takes the judicious course of conceding the appeal with the default position on sentence being ‘time served’. These delays, on any view, amount to a gross denial of justice. This situation ought not to become normalised and no one should treat it as acceptable. It is not.

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Are there solutions which can cure these delays? The answer is “yes”. We are living in a digital age. While I appreciate that not much can be done about matters of some vintage, it is possible that as Courts become more electronically driven, the use of real-time transcripts can become commonplace. Many digital platforms now utilised for remote hearings has this feature built-in. The legislative framework across the States and Territories simply need to catch up with this reality and recognise these electronic formats as official records of court proceedings. I urge our Heads of Government to enact the necessary legislation which will enable the use of electronic transcripts.

I recognise that some may argue that putting such systems in place will come at a cost. However, if it is thought that this is costly, then I ask that you think about the alternative – the inevitable weakening of the justice system and the immeasurable harm to the Rule of Law. I commend the Member States and Territories, such as Saint Lucia, Antigua and Barbuda and Montserrat, which have already taken steps towards implementing legislation to make digital preparation of transcripts a reality. The other States and Territories ought to now pick up the pace. It is simply inexcusable for a litigant to be delayed access to justice for the sole reason that a transcript of proceedings has not yet been prepared. This is most certainly an unjustified limitation on access to the courts and it cannot be permitted to continue. While I recognise that this move towards the real-time production of transcripts will require some time and support from all our stakeholders to bear fruit, it must be given due priority as it is an essential feature of any modern justice system.

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ONLINE ACCESS TO LEGISLATION

I now want to briefly mention other initiatives that have been formulated by the Court with a view to reshaping and enhancing the justice system. When one thinks about any modern justice system in the world, it is taken for granted that all legislation can be found online through a quick and easy search using any search engine. Unfortunately, this is not the case in respect of the Courts in all our Member States and Territories. This deficiency is even more apparent in the current environment when judicial officers and court staff may be required to work remotely. Online access to law resources is now a necessity for the effective daily operations of the Court. We will therefore seek to engage in discussions with the Hon. Attorneys General of the Member States and Territories with a view to having legislation for all Member States and Territories accessible online.

THE CIVIL PROCEDURE RULES 2000 REVIEW

In reimagining the justice system, a critical review of court procedure has also taken centre stage as we examine whether our Civil Procedure Rules adopted in 2000 are still fit for purpose in this digital age. This review, commenced in 2019 under the able co chairmanship of His Lordship, The Hon. Mr. Paul Webster, Justice of Appeal [Ag.] and former High Court Judge Professor Eddy Ventose, is ongoing. It involves a lot of work. I am happy to now report that the Committee is in the final stages of completion of its proposed amendments to the Rules.

The amended Rules will bring about much needed modernisation to civil procedure and practice as we know it in this age of electronic filing and remote hearings. I look forward with much anticipation to these Rules coming on stream in the upcoming months. I take this opportunity to thank the members of the Rules Review Committee for their hard work and dedication to the task.

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THE SENTENCING GUIDELINES PROJECT

The work of the Sentencing Advisory Committee, co-chaired by Her Ladyship, the Hon. Mde. Gertel Thom, Justice of Appeal and His Lordship, the Hon. Mr. Iain Morley, High Court Judge also continued over the last year. As recently as November 2021, re-issued sentencing guidelines compendiums covering some sexual offences, drugs and firearms , dishonesty , violent and homicide offences came into effect. At the same time, the murder Practice Direction was re-issued. This has brought the Advisory Committee's work to a close, paving the way for the next stage, which is the establishment of the Sentencing Guidelines Committee foreshadowed by the Sentencing Guidelines Rules. This Committee's mandate will be to monitor the effectiveness of the Guidelines and propose changes or new guidelines as may be deemed necessary. I am heartened by the extensive reliance by judicial officers, and legal practitioners alike, on the sentencing guidelines issued so far. Its impact has been felt by us on the Court of Appeal. I place on record my sincere appreciation for the hard and time-consuming work done by the Sentencing Advisory Committee and in particular the heavy lifting done by Justice Morley.

THE CODE OF ETHICS REVIEW

In my last address, I briefed you on our efforts to revamp and modernise the Code of Judicial Conduct governing judicial officers. This work was completed and I am pleased to report that in June 2021 the revised Code of Judicial Conduct and Commentary came into effect for all judicial officers of the Court, including magistrates and registrars. The principles set out in the Code serve as guidance for the standard of conduct expected of judicial officers in their day-to-day work, or during off duty activities.

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It includes guidance on a number of matters which have never before been set out in any written document, such as social media usage – a major part of a modern technology driven society which the Court must navigate. I place on record my deep appreciation to the Chair of the Code of Ethics Review Committee, Her Ladyship, The Hon. Kimberley Cenac-Phulgence, High Court Judge, and the members of the Committee for undertaking this significant task. I take this opportunity to encourage all judicial officers to become familiar with the Code as it is truly a useful guide in navigating and managing various challenges bearing on your daily life and duties.

THE FAMILY DIVISION PILOT PROJECT

Bringing this project to reality has been a monumental task requiring many stakeholders to work together. I am now able to say that we are nearing the finish line for implementation within the next couple of months in Antigua and Barbuda. The Family Proceedings Rules which will underpin the court processes in the Family Division of the Court are at the stage of finalisation with the anticipated date of promulgation of the Rules being 1st February followed by the Division commencing operation a few months later in April this year. The Committee has also developed a Practice Direction setting out the forms to be utilised in making applications in family proceedings. For their hard work and attention given to this project, I express my sincere appreciation to the Chair of the Committee, Her Ladyship, The Hon. Marissa Robertson, High Court Judge, resident in Antigua and Barbuda, and its members.

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If we are able to continue to modernise the Court's processes and put in place the mechanisms made possible by the use of ICT, allowing for even greater accessibility, then it would be true to say, that the Justice system, notwithstanding the pandemic but rather in spite of it, has been reimagined in ways which will better serve all the people of the OECS region in ways that will ensure its sustainability, efficiency, and accountability. These will in turn promote public confidence and sustain the Court's authority in our perennial quest for a more just society.

NEW JUDICIAL APPOINTMENTS

Before closing, permit me a few indulgences:

Firstly, allow me to officially welcome the new judicial officers appointed over the last year. I welcome His Lordship, The Hon. Justice Patrick Thompson Jr. who was appointed as a High Court Judge assigned to Saint Lucia in January 2021, His Lordship, The Hon. Justice Colin Williams who was appointed as a High Court Judge assigned to Antigua and Barbuda in March 2021; Her Ladyship, The Hon. Justice Jan Drysdale who was appointed as a High Court Judge assigned to Antigua and Barbuda in April 2021; Master Charon Gardner-Hippolyte who was appointed as a Master in May 2021 and Master Alvin Pariagsingh who was appointed to act as a Master in the same month. I am delighted to officially welcome you all as members of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court Bench, some of you having provided tremendous assistance to the Court during previous acting appointments over the years. I also wish to extend my gratitude to the many legal practitioners and retired judges who have assisted the Court over the last year by taking up acting appointments to fill voids on the Bench. Echoing the words of King George VI 'the highest of distinctions is service to others'.

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Secondly, allow me also to place on record our appreciation for the continued support of the OECS Bar Association and the constituent Bar Associations of the Eastern Caribbean. I am especially pleased at all the continuing education efforts undertaken by the Associations for the benefit of its Members. I foresee that ICT proficiency will become an added qualification of legal training. I encourage you to keep up the good work and to never flinch from your duties in taking the hard decisions which are necessary at times to preserve and maintain the integrity of the legal profession for the due administration of justice.

Permit me also to convey my sincere gratitude to our cohort of judicial officers for their tremendous efforts over the course of the last year. Surely, you have all gone above and beyond. This last year was a difficult one for many of us – some of us separated from close family and relatives and thus beyond our normal solitary life.

Yet, we have persevered to see to it that you the public were not shut out in seeking to obtain justice. I thank you for your dedicated and continued service. This year, let us renew our energies and our focus to our tasks and continue to imagine and re-imagine ways to make the Court more efficient, thereby building a more improved justice system to which all can look and rely on with confidence.

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I also wish to thank our Registrars who have ably managed the operations of our Registries during this extremely difficult time and who continue to liaise with the Executive on matters of funding and resources for the smooth operations of the High Court.

RECOGNITION OF THE COURT'S STAKEHOLDERS

In all that we have managed to accomplish over the past year our stakeholders, partners and donor agencies have been there alongside us providing much needed assistance. On behalf of the entire judiciary, I express sincere thanks to the teams from the JURIST Project, IMPACT Justice, the United States Embassy and the British High Commission, the University of the West Indies, UWI-TV, UNDP, the Governments of our Member States and Territories as well as all those not specifically mentioned, for their continued support of the ECSC in our mission to provide access to a system of justice that is fair, efficient and accountable.

Finally, I express sincere gratitude to every individual who has contributed to the Court's continued success over the last year; in particular, our staff at the Court's Headquarters and in the various High Court Registries, members of the Public and Private Bars, the police as well as the people of the OECS whom we serve daily. I pray that the Almighty God will keep us all safe through this challenging period and that he will instill us with the courage and resilience to persevere.

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I once again thank you for your support of the Court as it journeys toward a reimagined justice system for the OECS and I thank the Governments of our Member States and Territories and you the people for giving me the great honour and privilege of being a part of that journey over the last nine years. May the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court go from strength to strength.

Thank you.

I now hand over to our Master of Ceremonies, Her Ladyship, The Hon. Vicki-Ann Ellis, resident High Court Judge in the Territory of the Virgin Islands.

Dame Janice M. Pereira, DBE, LL.D.

Chief Justice