



SPEECH

His Excellency Mr Dharambeer Gokhool G.C.S.K.,

President of the Republic of Mauritius

EVENT: TRIBUTE TO DR. PAUL OCTAVE WIEHE

**VENUE: OCTAVE WIEHE AUDITORIUM,
UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS**

DATE: 30 SEPTEMBER 2025

TIME: 14:00 HOURS

Protocol

Dr. the Hon' Arvin Boolell GOSK, Minister of Agro-Industry, Food Security, Blue Economy and Fisheries

Dr. the Hon' Kaviraj Sukon, Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research

Excellencies and members of the Diplomatic Corps

His Eminence Cardinal Maurice Piat

His Eminence Mgr. Denis Wiehe

Government Officials and representatives of the Private Sector

Dr. J.L. Autrey, GCSK, CSK, Chancellor of the University of Mauritius

Respected Members of the Management and Academic Faculty of the University of Mauritius

Esteemed family members and friends of the late Dr. Paul Octave Wiehe

Distinguished Guests,

Students,

Members of the Media

All Protocol observed

Introduction

Good afternoon.

Thank you for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to say a few words on this very special occasion as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the passing of Dr. Paul Octave Wiehe.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we just had the opportunity of listening to Dr Autrey, who has been closely associated with late Dr Octave Wiehe and who has taken us down memory lane to recall the key events of the life, work and legacy of Dr Octave Wiehe.

For those who have not had the opportunity of knowing Dr Wiehe, personally, you will have the opportunity of knowing and learning more about this remarkable son of the soil while going through the biography entitled “Octave Wiehe – un Mauricien Visionnaire” which will be launched today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was not lucky enough to know Dr Wiehe personally.

However, in the year, that is in 1975, when Dr Wiehe left us, I joined the University of Mauritius as a young Lecturer, an institution which he had served as Vice-Chancellor, between 1968 to 1973.

During my days at the University of Mauritius (1975 to 2011, when I retired but continued and thereafter as Part-Time Faculty until November 2024), there were regular references to Dr. Wiehe on certain specific occasions and in certain conversations on the Reduit campus.

We were also told that he was a very learned and versatile person.

This is borne out by the detailed account that has been provided to us by Dr Autrey about his varied fields of interests and his professional track record.

A couple of weeks ago, when Dr Autrey called at my office at State House, we had an opportunity to evoke a few aspects of the life and achievements of Dr Wiehe.

Since, I tried to gather more information about such a multi-faceted personality. There are a few aspects that I would like to underline.

A passion for learning

Allow me to remind you that the motto of the University of Mauritius is:

“Scientia Salus Patriae” meaning

“Knowledge at the Service of the Nation”.

Dr Wiehe was a person who had a passion for knowledge and learning and he was always on a learning curve, acquiring new knowledge through extensive reading writing, researching and writing.

Dr Wiehe’s philosophy and the University’s motto were perfectly synchronized.

The First Class Honours in Botany that he obtained from Imperial College bears testimony of his academic excellence, and his decision to come back and serve his country resonates with a courageous decision of serving one’s country and dedicating oneself to Mauritius rather than pursuing a career abroad.

I came to know that Dr Wiehe, as Vice Chancellor, was not confined to his office.

We were told that he would very often be seen walking on the campus premises, interacting with employees, but more importantly, would be examining and admiring the plants, trees and the birds.

Like a gardener, he would entertain a caring, almost a symbiotic and organic relationship with nature around and he was very human in his approach to the employees.

I would like to think that this love for plants was not just professional curiosity, but also an expression of who he was - a man who believed in growth, in diversity, in the nurturing of life, society and community.

Even today, species such as *Pandanus wiehei* and *Panicum wiehei* carry his name, as if nature itself has chosen to honour him.

At State House, I espouse Dr Wiehe's philosophy of caring for nature and I had the opportunity of discussing with Dr Autrey about combining our efforts to protect and preserve the State House rich biodiversity.

Entrepreneurial spirit

Dr Wiehe also had a very entrepreneurial spirit, and he did not stop at acquiring and sharing knowledge; he went one step further by applying the knowledge he acquired be it at Domaine de Labourdonnais, the MSIRI or the University of Mauritius,

We learn that Dr Wiehe and I quote:

Played a pivotal role in diversifying the estate's agricultural activities, introducing tropical fruits like mangoes, citrus, and passion fruits. His efforts laid the foundation for Les Vergers de Labourdonnais, a brand renowned for its jams, juices, and fruit pastes, which remain a hallmark of the estate's legacy.

As Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mauritius, he played a catalytic role in the development of higher education on the island.

His legacy is honoured in the Paul Octave Wiehe Auditorium, a lasting tribute to his contributions to science, education, and national progress.

In 1941, with his colleague R.E. Vaughan, he undertook pioneering ecological studies that revealed the alarming decline of our native forests.

This was not just science - it was foresight. At a time when few thought about biodiversity, he recognised the danger of losing our unique natural heritage.

Their work led to the creation of the Ancient Monuments and National Reserves Board in 1944, a landmark in conservation.

It is no exaggeration to say that Mauritius owes much of its surviving endemic flora to the seeds of awareness that Octave Wiehe helped to plant.

Lessons for our Times

Here, we find a lesson for our own times.

Today, as we grapple with climate change, deforestation, and the fragility of island ecosystems, we realise that he was not only a scientist of his era - he was ahead of his time, a man of vision, a man who foresaw the environmental Challenges of the 21st century.

Well before the world began speaking of climate change and biodiversity, he warned us of the threats to our native forests.

And it was his foresight and determination that enabled Mauritius to emerge as a pioneer in conservation.

As the first Director of the Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute (MSIRI), he did not view sugar just as an economic activity but the backbone of our livelihood, and this was a defining moment.

Under his leadership, the MSIRI became a Global Centre of Excellence.

In 1962, when Mauritius hosted the International Congress of Sugar Cane Technologists, scientists from across the world came here, to a

small island in the Indian Ocean, and witnessed world-class research taking place here.

Wiehe had put Mauritius on the map. But more importantly he had shown us what was possible when Science was pursued with vision and purpose.

Tribute to Dr. Paul Octave Wiehe

As we gather to honour his memory, it would be remiss not to acknowledge how profoundly his journey has shaped Mauritius.

His life continues to inspire us, because it was not the story of a man who lived only for personal success, but of one who lived for the greater good of his country and its people.

Though our paths never crossed, his legacy continues to guide my own commitment to this country.

Coincidentally, he was born in the same district, Riviere du Rempart, as mine. He was a great lover of nature; so am I.

Anything to do with our common rural background-I cannot say?

It was his conviction, as it is mine as well, that the strength and greatness of our nation does not lie in its size, but in the knowledge, character, and creativity of our people and the opportunity it provides to those who can make a significant difference and a positive impact on society.

So, I would like to pay my tribute to Dr. Paul Octave Wiehe for his unwavering dedication and service to the upliftment of our nation.

I also pay my respect to all those who, like him, have placed and continue to place their knowledge, talents, and their lives at the service of society and humanity.

Reflections for the way forward

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we pay our respects to Dr Octave Wiehe, this gathering must be an invitation to not only honour the life and accomplishments of Octave Wiehe but also reflect on how we can carry forward his legacy.

Today, we navigate complex, new challenges that demand a collective need for innovation and action:

Artificial Intelligence poses ethical dilemmas; the drug scourge is devastating our youth and conflicts around the world are deepening hate and division.

And it is in moments like these that the life and example of Dr. Paul Octave Wiehe becomes profoundly relevant and inspirational.

Launching of Biography

I am particularly pleased to be associated with the launch of the biography “*Octave Wiehe – un Mauricien visionnaire*”.

I understand that this book was conceptualised by Mgr Denis Wiehe, the youngest son of Dr. Wiehe, together with an editorial committee including Pierre Raffray, the husband of Dr. Wiehe’s granddaughter Odile; Dr. Lindsay Edouard; and Olivier Lalouette.

I congratulate and pay my respect to all the family members of Octave Wiehe for this laudable effort in preserving his legacy.

I am certain that this work will make his life, achievements, and his vision widely known to Mauritians and inspire future generations.

He teaches us that:

- Science must serve society because knowledge without application and benefit to humanity is hollow.
- Education must continue to be the cornerstone of nation-building.
- Nature must be cherished as our heritage.
- And Leadership must be grounded in service.

It is only by adhering to these noble thoughts that we can transform challenges into opportunities and build a stronger, resilient and forward-looking Mauritius for our future generations.

Conclusion

In closing, allow me to extend my gratitude once again to the University of Mauritius and the family of Dr. Paul Octave Wiehe for this meaningful gathering.

The biography to be launched is about a man of vision. Let me quote the following as my concluding remarks as they echo the true nature of Dr Octave Wiehe:

- **It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see. – Henry David Thoreau**
- **Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others - Jonathan swift**

Yes, Dr. Octave Wiehe was un Mauricien visionnaire.

May his memory continue to inspire us all and may God bless our Republic.

Thank you for your attention.