

Independence Day Message 2012

By Prime Minister

The Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, SC

**On the occasion of the Nation's
50th Anniversary of Independence**

31 August 2012

My dear fellow citizens of Trinidad and Tobago,

I am grateful to God that we can all be here today sharing in the pride and joy of the Golden Jubilee Anniversary of our Independence.

On this day, 50 years ago, we became an independent nation and for the very first time the Red, White and Black flag of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago was unfurled and the pride had only just begun.

From that moment to now the flag has inspired hundreds of thousands of us, it has brought us to tears, it has filled us with immense pride, it has made us feel at home in foreign places, it has given us a sense of identity and belonging to that special place, it defines us.

Across the nation today these very colours are proudly displayed in an outpouring of nationalism and patriotic pride.

Today, more than ever, we know what it means to be a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

For fifty years we have charted our own course as an independent nation proudly flying high the red white and black, ever steadfast in our commitment to our democracy and the rule of law and to the belief that all men and women are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights.

For fifty years as a nation, forged from the love of liberty in the fires of hope and prayer, with boundless faith in our destiny, we have proven our ability to determine the direction best suited to the needs of our citizens.

Our self-determination has brought success, recognition and respect to our great nation, here at home and on the world stage.

As our history shows, there were a few instances in the past five decades when we nearly let the fires fade to our near peril, but in the many times when we allowed the fires of hope and prayer to burn even more brightly, we stunned the world with our innovations, our achievements, our beauty and our humanity.

In areas such as academia, labour, sport, culture, literature, business, energy, entertainment, fashion, indeed in every sphere of human endeavour, we have produced global heroes, men and women who have excelled bringing us gold, silver and bronze, record breaking scores, titles in beauty and the fashion industry, Nobel Prizes, all sons and daughters of our soil who have ensured we will always be remembered as a people of great achievement, as a great nation.

And for every luminary in our past and present, there are also thousands of unsung heroes some of whose names we may never know, but whose courage, dedication and commitment to our country have helped to make us the great nation that we are.

It is a time for each of us to stand proud together as Trinidadians and Tobagonians as we celebrate this important milestone in our nation's history.

And, even as we reflect on all we have achieved and as we take stock of our accomplishments over the last fifty years, I am of the firm view that we are about to embark on a promising new era in the history of our young Nation as we stand together, not as a nation built on sand, but as a nation built on the solid rock of the foundations laid by so many of our citizens who preceded us and citizens who continue to fortify those foundations.

Today, we stand proudly on the shoulders of the giants who came before us and those who continue to fortify us, both sung and unsung heroes of our nation.

I pay my deepest tributes to those great men and women who positioned us as an independent nation.

In particular, I pay tribute to the Honourable Dr Eric Eustace Williams, our country's first Prime Minister and founding Father of our Nation, Dr RudranathCapildeo, the first Leader of the Opposition of an independent Trinidad and Tobago, Sir Ellis Clarke, the principal architect of our 1962 Constitution and first President of Trinidad and Tobago.

They stand beside many equally talented citizens, who demonstrated the vision and courage to recognize that in order to survive as a small, independent nation of such remarkable diversity, we needed to embody and epitomize the spirit and character of democracy in its truest form –

respect, tolerance and a determination to protect and safeguard our democracy and our sacred human rights and to have the willpower to let this forever be our hallmark as a nation.

Our founding leaders thus engineered the direction of our new nation under God with a self-reliant, ambitious people living in liberty and harmony and, today, I pay homage to them as we express our gratitude and thank God for the significant contributions they made to Trinidad and Tobago.

And after fifty years of peaceful, democratic governance, we pay homage to those leaders and to all who supported the pursuit of our independence.

Their faith in the capacity of our country and our people was crucial to the growth of Trinidad and Tobago as we know it today.

And as we reflect on the vision of our early leaders, there is no doubt that we are standing also on the shoulders of other giants, including Butler, Cipriani, Rienzi, Gomes and CLR James to name a few.

And over the fifty years there are many more giants to acknowledge for placing us where we are today.

And so, I pay tribute to those great men and women who sacrificed and worked hard to shape and sustain the three organs of our constitutional government: the parliament, the judiciary and the executive.

I pay tribute to the working class and in particular, the thousands of public officers and the protective services and the business class, whose dedication to duty developed our economy and social institutions.

I pay tribute to our religious leaders and organizations which through all the years kept us and, continue to keep us firmly grounded in our faith and belief in God.

With boundless faith in our destiny, we made tremendous strides as a nation, as one people over the past fifty years.

Trinidad and Tobago, our small island nation, has changed the sound of the world in music by gifting it with - the steelpan, the only acoustical musical instrument invented in the 20th Century, tassa, calypso, soca, chutney and parang which reflect the rich tapestry of diversity in our nation.

The contributions of pioneers such as Ras Shorty I, Sundar Popo, Lord Kitchener and Sparrow will never be forgotten.

They will continue to inspire the coming musical generations both locally and around the world.

We have become known for the greatest show on earth, our Carnival.

In 1962 we established our own Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, the military organisation responsible for defence of our nation.

We can feel duly proud that the TTDF, comprising the Regiment, Coast Guard, Air Guard and Defence Force Reserves, as one of the largest and best equipped military forces in the English speaking Caribbean, has played major roles both locally and internationally, and has rendered assistance to our Caribbean brothers and sisters in times of need.

We have shown our prowess in the world of sport, as is evident by the outstanding performances of our cricketers, such as Brian Charles Lara: World Record Holder for the most runs scored both in a Test and in a First Class Innings and three times claimed the highest individual batting records.

Brian Lara, a son of our country, has brought us honour and pride as one of the most globally celebrated cricketers in the world.

In 2006, our Soca warriors qualified for the FIFA World Cup in Germany, for the first time making us the smallest country ever to qualify.

We have witnessed excellence in the outstanding performances of our Olympic athletes, in particular our gold medallists, Hasley Crawford and recently, Keshorn Walcott, our silver medallists and our bronze medallists, Rodney Wilkes, Lennox Kilgour, mc Donald bailey, AtoBaldon, Wendell Mottley, Lalonde Gordon, Richard Thomson, George Bovell and others.

We have made our mark in the creative industries, fashion, music and literature.

We have produced a Nobel Prize winner - Sir V.S. Naipaul.

1We have a tradition for doing well at international beauty pageants winning several with names such as Janelle Penny Commisiong, Giselle La Rondeand Wendy Fitzwilliam recognised as women of intelligence, beauty, charm and poise.

PeterMinshall, Carnival designer, is known for his role in the opening ceremonies of the Barcelona Olympics, the 1994 Football World Cup, the 1996 Summer Olympics and the 2002 Winter Olympics for which he even won an Emmy Award.

Heather Headley who has won both a Tony Award for theatre and a Grammy Award.

In the world of trade and investment, we have developed Trinidad and Tobago into being a gateway to Latin America, CARICOM and the wider Caribbean.

Our entrepreneurs have earned our country respect through their success both at home and abroad.

We remain a leading world exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas, methanol and ammonia and can feel proud that our small island nation is amongst the world's oldest and most experienced in the energy sector.

Our local education system provides universal education to all citizens from primary education straight through to secondary school, and our universities are recognised as learning institutions which produce graduates of the highest calibre.

We have surpassed the United Nations MDG in our education sector. Trinidad and Tobago has indeed made a name for itself on the global stage.

Unlike other nations, we can be proud of our history of a strong democracy and a peaceful elections process.

Democratic change has come time and again without the violence and chaos that characterizes the electoral process in so many countries in the world.

Our political maturity in this regard is a beacon in a world where so many countries today are struggling to achieve peaceful democratic change.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we live in harmony; we celebrate our multi-ethnic, multi-religious society; we enjoy peace and democracy.

And this is a credit to the nature of our people and the way we live among each other, sharing and enjoying our music, food and culture and religious observances.

We do have so much to celebrate in Trinidad and Tobago in this, our 50th year of independence.

Yet now, on the occasion of our Golden Jubilee, let us not only acknowledge and take pride in our accomplishments, but let us take this opportunity to look ahead and envision the future that we want for Trinidad and Tobago.

Where do we want to see our nation forging ahead?

What do we want for our country and our citizens?

Where do we want to see Trinidad and Tobago in the next fifty years?

These are questions that each and every one of us must ask ourselves, because it is only when we work together hand in hand side by side can we lay the groundwork for a prosperous nation.

My fellow citizens, we must continue to build our sense of patriotism and nationhood.

Each of us has our own expectations for the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

But above all, we want to see our country flourish.

The responsibility lies within each of us as Trinbagonians, to take the future into our hands and play our own part in taking Trinidad and Tobago forward.

Vision

EQUITABLE WEALTH DISTRIBUTION

I not only envision but also plan for a nation in which the wealth of our nation is more equitably distributed.

For far too long some of our citizens have sat on the sidelines watching so called development take place while their lives remain relatively unchanged.

As we observe and celebrate the achievements of the past 50 years we have every right to be proud but we also have every reason to do some soul searching on where we might have done better and what kind of nation we must create.

VALUES

What is the purpose of a society in which the landscape appears to be more modern but there is an absence of values?

What is the purpose of children attending more schools, being better educated but are more prone to violent behaviour and the erosion of family values?

What is the purpose of a good school feeding programme when children go home to bad parenting?

What is the purpose of producing great local artistes with their unique genres of music, even inventing rhythms and instruments unique to the world, when we have not learnt to appreciate their value and would even celebrate our own 50th Anniversary by heralding musical celebrations from other countries?

I intend to pursue specific ways to begin a transformation of our society.

Our character education programme launched by the Ministry of Education is one way we begin instilling values at an early age.

And I wish to formally announce that Cabinet will be examining a formal parenting programme based on those which have achieved remarkable success in other parts of the world.

We cannot change what kind of adults our children become unless we change the kind of parents we are and so many of us do not know how to cope with the stresses of our lives and the responsibilities of parenthood.

Family life has changed from what it was 50 years ago but there has been no comprehensive, effective system or programme put in place to buffer the negative effects of single parent homes and stressful professional life.

I intend to examine ways and incentives through which more local arts, music and culture and sport can receive greater exposure and appreciation in Trinidad and Tobago.

ARTS AND CULTURE

The erosion of what belongs to us must stop.

Let us begin the conversation with the artistic community with all their abundant talent our nation is blessed with on the ways and means of changing things and together with government let us begin implementing the measures necessary.

Again, what is the purpose of creating a better business environment, one that produces more value generating ideas and investment ventures when the value of life itself appears to amount for less by criminal elements?

I believe the creation of a value based society is one long term way of beginning the changes necessary to do so.

But I also believe that the short term tough imposition of law and order upon those who today are bent on creating mayhem must be enacted now.

The Ministry of National Security has been sharing with me a two pronged approach to dealing with this issue.

One is a strong social programme that includes an intensifying of sports activity, mentorship, education, skills training and employment while the other arm is about an aggressive zero tolerance intervention in all hot spot areas.

Special units, new resources, surveillance technology and interception methods combine to make the strategies different and more effective.

As we celebrate our 50th Anniversary, crime is one of the critical areas which remains an unfortunate reminder of how much needs to be done to transform our society.

This did not happen overnight.

But we must see this as the dawn of a new day in changing it and I recommit my pledge here on the 50th Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that every resource possible will be engaged and invested in turning the situation around.

I take this opportunity to announce that a major new phase of development that has been engaging our attention over the past few months will be revealed within the coming weeks.

It will cover the most ambitious infrastructural and financial investment programme ever launched in Trinidad and Tobago, one that will become a beacon for the region.

As you know the nation's new Minister of Finance has been diligently planning the way forward for Trinidad and Tobago that will be worthy of the celebrations we mark today across the nation.

This is indeed a new era, a new opportunity, a shift in consciousness and conscience.

I am fortunate to lead a government that marks our beloved nation's 50th Anniversary but I am keenly aware of the huge expectations of a population that has waited far too long over the past few decades to see the kind of changes needed.

This celebration and the well timed recent inspiring accomplishments of our Olympic athletes allow us to recognise the value of what it means to be identified with the Red, White and Black, what it means to be a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago and to know we have the ability to conquer all odds, to be the best in the world, to recognise in ourselves that amazing feeling that comes from truly acknowledging ourselves.

And in this acknowledgement all differences disappear, the power of who we are as One People emerges.

Trinidadian, Tobagonian, Proud, Passionate, Patriotic.

If it were possible to package the spirit that flows across the nation at this time, all that we ever wish to become would be readily realised for there is nothing more powerful than a people united by a celebration and recognition of themselves.

We were all so moved upon hearing our anthem play and our flag displayed when Keshorn Walcott stood on the podium at the just concluded Olympics; those emotions, that overwhelming sense of pride define us.

Let it be a timely reminder now of what we truly celebrate today.

A small but great nation comprised of different ethnic groups woven together through our arts, culture and cuisine and religion.

And I am confident that moments such as these help us to be reminded that through creativity, innovation and collaboration, we shall reach new heights together.

At 50, this is our coming of age.

It is not the time for complacency.

It is the time for progressively redoubling our efforts to ensure no one is left behind.

It is time for a new approach to politics – a more mature politics which is no longer defined by religion, race or geographical place or partisan interest but by policy that is not only even-handed and all inclusive, but also speaks to where we, as a nation must be when we celebrate our centennial fifty years from now.

Just as society was ready to embrace progress in 1962, now fifty years on, we the people of Trinidad and Tobago are ready to advance our democracy and inclusiveness.

We are ready to welcome a new era- An era which sees Trinidad and Tobago moving forward as a dynamic, trail-blazing nation in our region and around the world.

In his speech on our first Independence day, August 31st, 1962, Dr. Williams told us that democracy means the protection of citizens from the exercise of arbitrary power and the violation of human freedoms and individual rights.

He called on us to dedicate ourselves to these principles of democracy.

Now, fifty years later, in 2012, as we remain committed to fulfilling his mandate, we acknowledge that we are on the threshold of unparalleled social change and national development which embraces the politics of inclusion.

Over the past 50 years we have risen up against systems of oppression based on racial and social inequality.

We have protested against unfairness, injustice and exploitation.

Just as we relegate the remnants of colonialism to the past, so too we must now cast off the shackles of discrimination, inequity and inequality which persist in our beloved land.

Our iconic national anthem affirms that our nation was “forged from the love of liberty” and pledges that “every creed and race find an equal place”.

We must become a nation more committed to upholding human rights.

Through a number of state mechanisms, we will ensure that the Trinidad and Tobago of the future is one where no one is the victim of stigmatisation or prejudice, and where everyone is afforded equal rights and opportunities and where the playing field is levelled to enable everyone an equal opportunity to pursue and achieve their legitimate goals and aspirations.

This is the legacy I wish to leave as we begin this new period in our history.

This is part of the foundation my government will build.

But this vision cannot be achieved alone.

We must all work together, the public and private sectors, labour, civil society, communities, and individuals, to fulfill the collective aspirations of our people.

We have all seen – the spirit of determination and unity embodied in Trinbagonians.

In times of hardship, we have come together and strengthened our sense of community.

Recently, in the aftermath of the floods which affected so many across our country, I saw solidarity and brotherhood in the midst of tragedy.

I saw neighbours, friends, family and strangers helping those in need, offering comfort and support wherever they could.

This is how I know that we will continue to stand strong as a nation and as a people.

Our morale, our togetherness, our unity – these will carry us through any adversities we may face.

Fellow citizens, we are at a critical juncture in the history of our Nation.

Fifty years of Independence have gone.

I ask you what will be our legacy over the next fifty years?

How will we be judged by our children’s children?

Will we be found lacking?

Or will we be heralded as the visionaries who did what was necessary for the future of the next generation?

We have to continuously work for the changes we seek.

This is how we will bring about positive growth in our nation.

We must be determined and unflagging in our efforts to uphold the legacy left to us by Dr. Eric Williams and Dr. Rudranath Capildeo in 1962.

And that legacy was to keep moving forward, to be tenacious and brave, and to take the necessary steps to secure the best possible future for Trinidad and Tobago.

Not one of us can or should ever deny our ancestral past.

Our culture and our traditions tell the stories of the many lands from which we came, of the many hardships our foreparents endured and of the successes they achieved.

For the health of our nation, if there is any void in the recounting, it must be filled in the coming years.

But today, all of us here are citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and because of our many roots, we are perhaps one of the most cosmopolitan countries in the world.

It is our widely varied heritage that has made us unique.

Our speech defines us.

Our cuisine defines us.

Our rhythm defines us.

Our passion defines us.

Be proud of this.

Be proud of what it means to be Trinbagonian.

We are now the co-creators of the present, paving the way for those who come after us. I urge you, fellow citizens, seize this opportunity for progress.

You are living in an exciting new chapter and it's in your power to carry our twin-island nation forward as a pioneer in our region.

Our best days are yet to come and together we will usher them in. As we celebrate our 50th year as an independent nation, let us with confidence and courage, stand side by side, with a renewed sense of hope for the future.

Let us recommit ourselves to the service of our country.

Let us endeavour to live our lives by the inspiring words of our national motto "Together we aspire, Together we achieve".

And let us continue to solemnly pledge our lives to this our native land Trinidad and Tobago.

I wish you all a very Happy Golden Jubilee of Independence.

May God continue to bless each of you and may God continue to bless our great nation Trinidad and Tobago.