

Independence Day Message 2013

By

Leader of the Opposition

Dr. The Hon. Keith Rowley

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Good day

I am very grateful for this opportunity to address the nation on this the fifty first Anniversary of Independence. I welcome you, all of those gathered here, all of you listening and viewing at home on your radio, your television sets and online.

Whether you reside here on our beautiful islands, or you reside in New York, Grenada, in London, in Mumbai, or in Dubai, or anywhere else in the world, we acknowledge you all and know that your heart is rooted here in Trinidad and Tobago. – Happy Independence to you.

Fellow citizens, it has been fifty one years since we claimed the responsibility of nationhood for ourselves. Where we moved from the colonial condition to an ever deepening democracy devoted to fundamental human rights and freedoms, Independence is a day to remember the great Trinidadians and Tobagonians that forged and framed our Constitution and our nation's independence more than five decades ago in The Marlborough House conference. This seminal conference included giants like Ashford Sinanan, Tajmool Hosein, Lionel Seukeran, Rudranath Capildeo, Sir Ellis Clarke and of course the Father of our great nation, an indomitable tower in our country's history, Dr Eric Eustace Williams.

Fifty one years on they would be proud of our levels of social integration, industrialisation; our strong middle class that has emerged from a dynamic combination of effective national policy and disciplined individual effort; and the unquestionable overall national commitment to civilised society in Trinidad and Tobago. Notwithstanding our immediate challenges, the vast majority of people in Trinidad and Tobago are very expectant, seeking always to improve their lives and in the process making their contribution to the social and economic development of the nation.

We all should be proud of the ingeniousness of our people who have been able to create an orchestra out of oil drums and compose music so tied to our collective soul that it can touch

our spirit. We have all listened and at times marvelled at the wit and honesty of our calypsonians in their commentary of what is current. We know the pure genius of men and women who can build our mas out of wire, glue, braid and cloth, works of art that are seared into our consciousness as beacons of national pride capturing the attention of viewers and participants the world over.

All too often the public space is clogged with narratives of purely critical eyes and sometimes miss all that is right with our country, that we are a melting pot like no other, one where every man woman and child owns every beat of the tassa drum, every chord in a parang song and every bell in a rapso chant. We all delight in, respect and celebrate each religion as if it was our own. We all remember the first deya we ever lit, the first time we heard a verse of the Quran sung, the first time we heard an Orisha bell ring and the first time we received a Christmas present.

I believe fifty one years on, we possess a level of harmony which is exemplary to the world and would be perhaps unrecognisable to some who were present at Marlborough House. The concerns in 1962 are not the concerns now. The collective anxieties of 1962 are not the collective anxieties today. We have without question, matured politically and socially as a people and as a nation in many ways. But yet we are still bound and in some respects restrained by structures and systems of government that were relevant to a bygone era but less effective now.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is now more than a half century on and I am firmly convinced that our Parliament, as presently operated, is not only inadequate but a definite impediment to the development of this country. After half a century, it is time for bold transformation. Whatever model we eventually adopt, it must, inter alia, ensure proper representation of the people in the decision making process; act as a fierce watchdog on the Cabinet, Public Service and State Enterprises, ensuring transparency, real time accountability and the elimination of corruption and waste in our public affairs. It must be empowered to negotiate budgets, legislation and public policy with the Cabinet on behalf of the people; and have effective Parliamentary Committees with the power and resources to summon public officials to inquiries that can lead to serious attendant consequences where shortcomings are observed. Key public officials such as the Governor of the Central Bank, the Commissioner of Police, Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue, Chairmen and Executives of Local Government bodies etc. should be able to report and be examined regularly as required and take questions from the people's representatives on all sides of the political divide.

A Parliament where if tax payers bailout a regulated private financial institution to the tune of billions of dollars, that the management of such an entity and the State's regulatory agencies should appear before a Parliamentary Committee to answer to the people's representatives

directly. Such a system will allow the public to be properly informed in a satisfactory manner, as to who did what, when, where and how and it will also allow decision making to be less secretive and erode the widespread public cynicism which currently prevails.

Let me make it clear, we in the People's National Movement (PNM) have not yet decided on any particular model of the new governance we seek to fashion. We continue to discuss this critical issue in our party and will reach our conclusions before too long. But as we start our second fifty years of independence, I thought the matter fundamental enough to lay on the table, hoping to stimulate further debate on this matter which I consider important above all else, since it will positively influence every aspect of life in this country and eventually strengthen every institution on which our democracy depends.

I am firmly convinced that a renewed Trinidad and Tobago requires a transformed Parliament. It is the way to involve the people in their own governance in a manner that they have not yet experienced, giving them greater responsibility for the quality of their lives, thereby making the concept of independence ever more meaningful.

It is against this background that at the party level we have given the Tobago Island Council of the PNM, total autonomy for Tobago affairs and have amended our movement's constitution to reduce the power and tenure of the Political Leader and introduce the 'one man one vote' system for the election of the National Executive.

As you could see tonight I speak standing first as citizen amongst you and not before you, not first as the Political Leader of the Peoples National Movement or the Leader of the Opposition but as a proud national seeing through patriotic eyes to fifty six years ago when Dr Eric Williams read for us the People's Charter, which eventually spawned our declaration of Independence.

Fifty one years ago a generation forged our independent nation out of a love for liberty, guided by the watch words discipline, production and tolerance. Back then we sang the national anthem with our heads skyward more like a prayer than just a song. We would do well to return to these watchwords since within them lies the solution to much of our current troubles.

Trinidadians and Tobagonians fifty one years ago, set upon a path to build a nation almost from scratch. We crafted a Constitution, and all of the institutions that we see and know and take for granted today: the Judiciary, the Service Commissions, the Parliament, the Defence Force, our Education System, the State Infrastructure, as well as an integrated economy. We nurtured the private sector, and put a safety net in place for rainy days as we set about embracing all of our Caribbean neighbours for our mutual benefit.

Our ancestors toiled in a vineyard made fertile by their vision and efforts hoping that their children and grandchildren would continue the prosperity and enjoy a better life. How much of that is being squandered today?

It is without question that we have had far more successes than failures. Like every nation there were times when we have had our collective lips pressed up against life's bitter cup. You all will remember the

economic collapse and the oil shock, social unrest in 1970 and in 1990 when many believed that all was lost and that confidence in our ability to navigate out of the storm was diminished. But as history will record we are a resilient people, who overcame each hurdle and moved on to continue in the hope of building a brighter better nation.

After fifty one years we have much to celebrate but much still remains to be done before we can be assured that our achievements are irreversible and that we can transform our successes into foundations for a secure, prosperous and stable future. We cannot rest now. We cannot look for short cuts and pied pipers or false messiahs now.

We can all agree to be proud of the nation that we built thus far; however, to improve it we need to determine what and where to make these improvements and we need to do this with a sense of purpose and togetherness.

There are many underserved communities where thousands of idle, unproductive and misguided young people without sustainable jobs or a proper education, are giving away their lives to gang leaders and drug dealers every day. There are many parents who look at the dreams that they hold for their children and see them thrashed by the circumstances in which they live.

This cannot continue. We have to move beyond the prevailing despair and provide the framework of understanding and effective responses. We sing our national anthem countless times but I want to point you to the commitment which is expressed in the phrase, "side by side we stand". This is not just about the geography of the islands but a call to be our brothers' keepers.

In Trinidad and Tobago we are all connected. The future of a child in East Port of Spain is all our future. The fear of a woman taking a taxi home to Arima, that fear of being assaulted or robbed is our fear. The pain of the wife of a store owner killed in Caroni or Laventille is all our pain. The humiliation of a mother in a grocery knowing she can't afford enough basic foodstuff for her family is all our humiliation, and the hunger of her child our hunger. The lack of adequate infrastructure to facilitate safe and easy movement of the differently abled is our failing and the

anxiety of young graduates leaving school facing a dormant job market is our anxiety and uncertainty.

Two weeks ago I met with some citizens of our country who had been reduced to homeless refugees not far different to those of a war-torn embattled state. They were thrown out of their homes by organized groups of gangsters and thugs. They fled from their homes of twenty years out of fear that the intruders would kill them. I submit to you on this the occasion of our Independence, that there is far a worse fear and devastating reality present in this. It is the fear and reality that the state seems unable to adequately protect them and their property.

The French philosopher Rousseau is credited with framing the fundamental essence of the social contract. Simplified, he posits that as citizens we cede some individual rights to the nation state, and that implicit in that, is the agreement that the state's primary function and first responsibility, is to protect its citizens, their rights and their property.

I invite you here to ponder on whether or not, in the case of the Duncan Street residents, the state in its widest and highest form has abjectly failed in its first duty to those citizens. It is for each of you to decide if it has failed and if so to reflect on the magnitude of such failure.

Think about losing your home of twenty years to gangsters and the state and all its agencies appear impotent to repossess your home and restore your rights.

The solution to this and many of the other problems we face at this time is that we need to start again from today, focusing squarely on building a better nation. This must start with the understanding that we are in this together, one people and one national community. We must now embrace the idea that while we are an independent state we are in fact an interdependent people. There is an inescapable connection between all communities in Trinidad and Tobago rich and poor, north and south, east and west.

The only way Trinidad and Tobago can satisfactorily progress onward into another fifty years is together, side by side leaving no one behind. It must be that in times of our brother's trouble we must reach out and assist him and in times of our own trouble we must know that we will be assisted by our brothers.

In my quiet moments I question if who we are today is who we set out to be. I am left to wonder about the kind of country we are building for our children and grandchildren to inherit. A nation is not only built on roads, ports, box drains, bridges and buildings, but is built on the collective dreams, ideas, aspirations, values and the principles of its people.

I have heard a new conversation taking place in Trinidad and Tobago that may perhaps be signaling a change in our ideology. It is a conversation that rationalizes instant gratification as

the new order. It offers that integrity in public life is now optional; that the ends justify the means no matter how unprincipled and innately dishonest they are. The conversation explores the possibility that Trinidad and Tobago should now feel comfortable that it is ok to cut corners and plunder once the spoils are shared. It also says that persons are no longer expected to do what is right because it is the right thing to do. I can only imagine how unfathomable this would be to those who were present at the birth of our nation, fifty one years ago.

It is my view that the fact that our society is even entertaining these ideas and having this conversation is fundamentally dangerous and threatens to destroy everything that is collectively good and decent about us as an emerging independent people.

Is it that we are willing to surrender to corruption, indignity, hollow platitudes, fancy speeches, political spin, and flashing blue lights that hide and dazzle with all manner of wrongdoing associated?

Let me say here now to all patriotic Trinidadians and Tobagonians that I reject that conversation and all it connotes, with a deep conviction that I know most of you share with me.

Public service should remain an endeavour for nobility of intention, intellectual debate, honest ideas, balanced judgment, compassion, dedicated service and most of all an unwavering commitment to nation building.

I call on all of you who are like minded, regardless of your political affiliation to help protect and rebuild the values and defend the virtues upon which our nation was built. I will continue to do my part to advocate that every effort is made to ensure that our public institutions are not allowed to descend into an abyss where right and wrong are almost indiscernible. It is and will always be my commitment to defend, support and nurture the principles and values that have the potential to make us great.

In closing, I urge you to never forget the past and the inspiration it provides. We are the descendants of ancestors who built from virtually nothing, all having arrived here either willingly or forcibly from Europe, Africa, Asia, India and the Middle East, all having to toil at different levels and in different ways, but all requiring resilience, courage, commitment and determination to build new lives in a new land that was sometimes hostile.

Fellow citizens, our forefathers did not wait for others to change their lot or circumstance. They did not wait for a government to build a society but in building their community they were building a government. They were the change!

I call on all citizens to stop waiting for it to change you but make a change in your life for the better. We are the second wave of nation builders and it's time to pick up your tools and build "with boundless faith in our destiny".

On behalf of my family and the People's National Movement, once again, I extend Greetings and Best Wishes to all citizens on the occasion of our Fifty First Anniversary of independence.

May Almighty God continue to bless you and our beloved Trinidad and Tobago.