

# **An address to the Nation on its 53rd Anniversary of Independence**

By

**The Leader of the Opposition and the Political Leader of  
the People's National Movement**

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On this the 53<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of our country's proud independence, it is tempting to look back and think that the glorious successes of this country, were destined to happen -that the path to the rich tapestry that is Trinidad and Tobago, was easy and without trial, uncertainty and sometimes even turmoil.

Early in our nation's history we had the Canboulay riots of 1881 and the Water Riots of 1903. The former was a struggle for the freedom of self-expression, launched a half a century after the end of Slavery. The Water Riots two decades later, sought to redress the inequities of our colonial system of government. In 1937 we had the pioneers, Butler and Rienzi, uniting two worlds in a common struggle against working conditions and racism in the cane fields and oil fields of our country. The common yearning in all of these demonstrations was a growing sense of nationalism - the labour pains of our country being formed.

It was only on January 15th 1956 under the newly formed People's National Movement, led by Dr Eric Williams, did we adopt the People's Charter; a statement of fundamental principles which became the convention, that crystalized a people's aspiration; and galvanized a national movement that cut across all races, creeds, religions and classes uniting for the common good. The movement was a rally for all, out of which our very country was born. In more recent history we have endured multiple economic downturns - the oil shock of the 80's, having to manage our way out of the clutches of the IMF and the global financial crisis of 2007. We also had significant threats to our peace and security in 1970 and 1990. I say this, to show that as a people and a country, we have faced many days and nights where our future looked bleak, uncertain - days that tested our grit and tenacity as a people, against what seemed at the time, circumstances impossible to overcome. When our peace and victory was in doubt; when our

circumstances were at their worst, we held fast and did our best. And as one, we prevailed. Together we aspired with boundless faith and together we achieved.

In this our 53<sup>rd</sup> year of independence we find ourselves again facing challenges across the landscape of government and markets and the very value system on which this country was founded. We meet this anniversary of independence, with our people's patience and confidence in our Government, at a historic low. We have witnessed behaviours and actions from high office holders, that we could not previously fathom.

Fundamental rights were stripped away by an unexplained State of Emergency. We have seen openly biased attempts to tamper with our electoral system. We have seen an epidemic of corruption in all forms, and stood horrified by the indignity and arrogance of those whom we have elected to serve us.

We have seen our Parliament misused to meet unjust and undemocratic agendas. We sat confused through numerous Cabinet reshuffles and ministerial firings and hirings.

We have seen a public crisis of confidence in our independent institutions, on which our democracy is seated. In the past months I have spoken to large swathes of citizens, all concerned, as it seems that bad behaviour in public and private office has been protected and even rewarded. They were disenchanted that the state institutions on which we depend to seek our interest, were unwilling or unable to intervene, or bring resolution or clarity to issues before us.

I am sure that in recent months, we have all been paying attention to the price of oil and gas and the road ahead will require sound management, planning and clear heads. But we face a far bigger challenge than the decline in oil revenue; and that is the decline in confidence and optimism of our people. What this country deserves now is hope, and that the Government will govern for you and not govern for themselves.

In this 53<sup>rd</sup> year of independence, what our nation deserves - all races, all religions, all classes and all political persuasions is what was required in our first year of independence good government with vision; one that will govern with honesty, for all. It is time to move away from the political and social attitudes of, if you lose, I win. Progress is made from a wider vision and embrace.

While our backgrounds and ethnicities may be different, our anxieties for our children are the same; our aspirations for our families and country are the same.

If our history shows us anything, it shows us that what unites us is bigger than what divides us. It shows us that the spirit that lives in us as a people, that brought us through every challenge

we have faced in our journey to today, will be the spirit that brings us through any we may face in the future.

I hold an unshakable belief that everything that is wrong with our country can be fixed, with everything that is right in our country. I have an abiding belief that the dignity and decency of our citizens form the backbone upon which our past and future was, and still is dependent and it is what our Government must reflect. I believe in our national motto "TOGETHER WE ASPIRE TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE".

I believe that once we pull together, all interest groups: business and industry, social networks, Labour, NGOs and faith-based organisations and Government, we could unlock the potential of what is, a sleeping giant that is Trinidad and Tobago.

I have seen too many for too long sitting on the sidelines, numbed by the constant political rancour and harbouring disappointment and anger. For too long, too many people have left it all up to the Government. Too many of our citizens are too increasingly dependent on the Government. We have seen that sometimes the Government and red tape are the problem. But I say to you now, don't get angry. Get active. Get involved and build your community. Build your businesses. Build yourselves and your lives; and in doing so, build your country. Seize the opportunities of education that your fellow citizens provide you. Look after your health.

We must acknowledge that in some areas we must focus on reforming systems that reward failure and instead refocus them on success. Move away from systems built on mediocrity and build compassionate meritocracies and unlock the full potential of our human resources. We must retool an ailing education system and achieve better student preparations and outcomes. We need to expand the economy to ensure upward mobility, because there are tens of thousands of young people stuck in positions below their qualifications and potential. I hold the view that while we have been blessed with great natural resources, the best resource in any country is its people; and this will be our focus in the next 5 years.

As it happens, I give this Independence Day address exactly seven days before a General Election. An election is a time when emotions and rhetoric are high. It is a time when people are called on to examine the plans, the party, and the record of who is stepping forward for public service. It is a time to choose a direction for yourself and your country. It was exactly this choice we wanted as a people 53 years ago.

But this election is different. Very different. This election is a test of us as a people and what we are prepared to accept and what we are prepared to condone. This is a test of our common sense; of who we are and who we have become.

This is a test of basic dignity, the basic decency of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This election your vote will be the difference between the country we have, and the country we want.

This election I say to you, if you ever had to vote country first, this is that election. When you go to the polls, choose to restore our country's dignity and decency in public office, and in public affairs.

I know that there are many of you who do not believe that real political change could come, or that the PNM could bring it. I say to you now, if we all work together we can and would do it, as we have done it throughout the history of this country. Fifty-three years ago, public service was 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 say to you - why can't it be that again?

The only reason we are here is because the generations before us were unafraid to do what was hard; to do what was needed even when success was uncertain; to do what they had to, with boundless faith, to keep the dream of this great country alive for their children.

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

LET'S DO THIS TOGETHER.

Go out and vote

And may God bless you

May may God Bless our Nation