

MESSAGE TO THE NATION BY DR THE HONOURABLE KEITH ROWLEY, MP PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD & TOBAGO ON THE OCCASION OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO'S 54TH ANNIVERSARY OF INDEPENDENCE

31 August 2016

My fellow citizens,

By any measure, today should be regarded as a very significant and special day for each of us in Trinidad and Tobago.

Over the past few months, since assuming the responsibility of Prime Minister, you would have heard me speak about the importance of knowing and understanding our country's history. Trinidad and Tobago's passage from Colonial rule to Independence fifty-four (54) years ago represented a political watershed in our country's history.

While not wholly embraced by some members of the population, who initially expressed misgivings about the idea that Trinidadians and Tobagonians would be in complete charge of the affairs of the country, there was nonetheless an excitement and a sense of pride when the Union Jack was lowered for the last time at midnight on the 30th August 1962 and the national flag of Trinidad and Tobago was raised.

I am certain if we could transpose ourselves back to that momentous occasion we too would feel all those mixed emotions. On 31st August 1962, our Nation's first Prime Minister, Dr Eric Williams, in a radio broadcast to a new, democratic Nation stated, *"The first responsibility that devolves upon you is the protection and promotion of your democracy. Democracy means more, much more, than the right to vote and one vote for every man and every woman of the prescribed age. Democracy means recognition of the rights of others... Democracy means responsibility of the Government to its citizens, the protection of the citizens from the exercise of arbitrary power and the violation of human freedoms and individual rights. Democracy means freedom of worship for all and the subordination of the right of any race to the overriding right of the human race"*.

Fifty-four years later we must ask ourselves, how have we used our independence?

Yes we may be considered an economically buoyant and a politically stable country. We generally enjoy excellent bi-lateral relations with our CARICOM, Latin American and International neighbours and partners.

But have we really matured as a people?

As individuals, on our journey to adulthood we often crave independence. We wish to free ourselves from the dictates of parents, guardians, supervisors. But as we mature we realize that with independence comes great responsibility, hope and expectation.

We are responsible for our actions, the consequences of our decisions and more importantly, to achieve our goals we need to work with and through others. So too as a sovereign nation, independence demands a clear vision for our developmental path while remaining cognizant of local, regional and international trends.

The celebration of our country's 54th Independence Anniversary comes at a challenging time when international developments are seriously impacting our national economy. We are all aware of the fall in oil and gas prices, the resources upon which our country is heavily dependent for needed revenue.

We find ourselves at a crucial point in our development when we are being asked to make some tough choices. But I always feel assured of the strength of our people to navigate these turbulent waters. Our capacity for innovation, our understanding of international events, our creativity and our characteristic sense of humour will triumph over any adversity we may face. I have faith in our ability to rise to the task of building a better Trinidad and Tobago.

Our aim now, both as residents and non-resident nationals, should be to build on our achievements to enable our country to remain on a steady path of sustainable development.

We have a great deal of challenging work ahead of us but nothing worth achieving may be attained without dedication and hard work. We have a very bright future ahead of us. Of this I am certain. We will tackle our challenges head on, together. We have to take care of every aspect of this country...our political and democratic institutions, our physical environment, and most of all we have to take care of each other.

Trinidad and Tobago is my home, it is your home and we all have a responsibility to protect, to cherish and to make this country the kind of home of which we can all be proud.

I wish you all a very Happy Independence.

May God continue to bless you and your family and may God Bless our Nation.