



Message from
The Rt. Hon. Owen S. Arthur, M.P.,
Prime Minister of Barbados
on the 40th Anniversary of Independence
November 30, 2006

My Fellow Barbadians,

EACH YEAR I GREET YOU on Independence Day with a certain satisfaction, knowing that we have passed yet another milestone in our national pilgrimage.

This year, however, I have the honour of sharing with you our entire society's distinct sense of achievement and satisfaction of having triumphed over 40 years as a sovereign independent nation.

Forty years ago, in 1966, when the British Union Jack was lowered to the ground at the Garrison Savannah and the Broken Trident took its first ceremonial flutter in a Barbadian night, that act, in a sense, gave formal and constitutional expression to a spirit of liberation that had always enjoyed generous display in our Barbadian society.

We now take our Independence for granted.

It is easy to forget that in 1966, Barbados was at the time the smallest country ever to seriously contemplate standing on its own in a world already beset by complex social and economic challenges.

There was no certainty that a country of our size and circumstances would succeed.

Indeed, in the debate in the British House of Commons on October, 1966, on the Barbados Independence Bill, both sides of the Parliament spoke of the special, inherent dangers that Barbados would face as a single crop economy.

Our claim to Independence, however, rested on the strong foundation of the special qualities which, taken together, even then defined the Barbadian personality.

The Jamaican writer, John Hearne, writing at the time of Barbados' Independence, noted this in a piece entitled What The Barbadian Means To Me, published in the New World Barbados Independence Issue of 1966.

He spoke then of a Barbados in which there was a concern for public order, a compassion for others and a civilised way of life. And though describing the Barbadian as "Englished" by history, he saw it as one of the inheritances that gave him the extra-ordinary self-confidence and self-discipline that immediately impressed every visitor to the island. In his words:

"There is a 'wholeness' to the Barbadian that I have not found in any other British Caribbean territory:

"an awareness of himself as a person that is remarkable, enviable and, in every sense of the word, good.

"There are no other children in West Indian fiction like George Lamming's growing boys in "In the Castle of My Skin".

"Whatever problems of poverty, race prejudice, and lack of social structure they face, they operate out of a powerful individuality.

"They have a cultural reference point that is truly original".

It was his contention then, that one of the most fascinating studies over the generation would be to see what the Barbadian made of himself as a man now responsible for his own destiny.

Our achievements so far, in most cases, have borne out the success story of a small developing country with few natural resources on which to rely, but with a huge capacity to achieve above its mere size, drawing upon its political stability, the prudent management of its affairs and an inherent belief in itself.

Indeed, the 40th Anniversary of our independence finds Barbados exhibiting features of development and progress that are admirable in every respect.

We have consistently maintained the top rank among all developing countries in relation to human development. And the standard of living we provide to our citizens is exceeded in the Western Hemisphere only by Canada and the USA.

Barbados has also consistently received top rankings for our standards of good governance, the protection of human rights, and the quality of the economic freedoms our citizens enjoy.

In addition to over 40 years of Independence, we have consistently paid our way in the world, paid all our debts on time, and now stand very much on our own as a society which does not rely on financial aid from anyone.

We have also taken what was a single-crop sugar economy at Independence and diversified it to such an extent that our economy was recently rated as one of the most competitive (31st) in the world.

In addition, we have so managed our economic affairs that in areas such as the creation of employment, the eradication of poverty and the management of our fiscal affairs, Barbados has attained standards that exceed those of some first world societies in Europe.

With such a record, it is therefore perhaps fitting that, even as we prepare to celebrate our coming of age as a society, we are also preparing to have our nation enjoy an unprecedented spotlight on the stage of global affairs as the place where, within six months, two global sporting events will take place.

This 40th year of Independence finds Barbadians saving and investing more, constructing more homes, and enjoying higher levels of income than ever before.

It also finds Barbados caught up in the exercise of building major new production capacity and new infrastructural and service facilities that will be available to support an improved standard of living of generations of Barbadians in the future.

Life, in a recent publication 100 Places To See In Your Lifetime: Heaven On Earth, captured it well, not only by including Barbados in such exalted company, but by including Barbados on the very cover of the publication.

All these are breathtaking achievements for a small resource-poor island.

But let us not take them for granted. It was not always so. And there is no assurance that it will always be so.

Indeed, 40 years ago, these achievements might have seemed wild dreams.

Back then we had a one-crop agricultural economy. We had only a fledgling tourism sector. We had no reserves of energy nor minerals to speak of, and no prospects for heavy industry. Apart from a new deep water harbour, we had a rudimentary physical infrastructure. Our education and health services were basic and there was a lack of affordable housing.

Everywhere there was evidence of endemic poverty.

Yet, we had something intangible; something more valuable than gold or oil. We believed in ourselves. Have no doubt about it, Independence was a bold step. It required vision and

enormous self-confidence. Without the freedom to chart our own course, the sovereignty to decide what is best for ourselves, we would not be where we are today.

Moreover, long before economists recognised that it is ideas and values more than anything else that drive economic growth, we had the foresight over the past 40 years to make massive investments in the education, health and well-being of our people. Those investments in social capital have paid handsome dividends.

Above all, it was our belief in ourselves that drove us along this path to success.

It was also our values as a people that sustained us through the several storms both natural and economic that have battered our shores over the years. For example, the viability of the fixed exchange rate of our currency is sustained as much by the conviction of Barbadians that this is a sensible and fair arrangement as it is by the performance of our economy over the past four decades.

We cannot afford, therefore, ever to take our achievements for granted. While we should all welcome continued material progress, while we should all be grateful that we have more of the good things than previous generations, while we should all enjoy an enhanced quality of life, we must not as a people lose our sense of identity. For if we stop knowing who we are and become pallid imitations of others, then we will undermine the very foundation of the edifice that we have built as an independent society.

If that happens we will lose our confidence; we will look to others to do things for us; we will become risk-averse; we will cease to aspire to be the best we can be. That intangible quality that has brought us so much success will vanish and our society will be in danger of collapsing into mediocrity.

Hence, after two generations of independence, it is important that we, in a sense, renew our vows, and seek, as a people, to embark on a new phase of our history in which we aspire to be a fully developed country, with all the standards of excellence which that ambition implies.

This will be an equally bold step that will also require vision, self-confidence and a cultural renewal. We will need all our pride and our industry. We will need to ensure that the arrangements under which we live are ones founded on trust, fairness, civility and the recognition that the life of each person is sacred; and we will need to live true to the ideal of what it is to be a Barbadian.

So, my fellow Barbadians, I exhort you to build on the solid foundation of the past 40 years.

Let us continue striding upward and onward, inspired exulting free, so that this nation of ours will continue to grow in strength and unity.

We must continue practising what makes us a great nation. We must resist the complacency, which even now threatens to undermine all that our forefathers and we ourselves have achieved through blood, sweat, tears and toil.

Let us grasp every opportunity to better our best, to increase productivity, eliminate pockets of poverty, eradicate the worrying criminal element, and totally destroy the scourge of illegal drugs, especially among our youth.

The ghastly alternative to future posterity is national decline and degradation if we choose to ignore all or any of the signs of weakness in our society.

If we fail to live up to today's challenges, all the gains of the last 40 years will dissipate and history will not absolve us.

My fellow Barbadians, let us therefore make the celebration of our 40th anniversary an occasion for the renewal and the refreshment of our commitment and dedication to ourselves to be good Barbadians, and to our nation - to make it the very best that it can be.

Above all, let us give thanks to the Almighty for the many blessings that have been bestowed on us and that have brought us to this stage as a peaceful, sovereign nation. And let us continue to count on Him to be our people's guide as we face the future with confidence.

To all Barbados, I wish you a Happy Independence and may God eternally guide and bless our fair land, now and forever.