

Address to the Nation

By

His Excellency Bharrat Jagdeo

President of the Republic of Guyana

On the Occasion of

The 39th Anniversary of Guyana's Independence

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Tonight and tomorrow we celebrate the thirty-ninth anniversary of our country's Independence.

Surely, then, this is an opportune time to reflect, however briefly, on how far we have travelled since Guyana attained that most important water-shed in its history and to envisage where the journey is taking us.

Thirty-nine years ago, almost to the hour, on this very spot, the Union Jack was lowered; and the Golden Arrowhead, that proud symbol of our status as an independent nation, was hoisted to signal that we now belonged to the comity of free nations.

We were determined to transform, according to Martin Carter, "the dark hut in the shadow" into a modern place. We recognized the diversity of our ethnic strains, but pledged to create out of that diversity, "one land of six peoples/united and free." How the goose bumps bristled and the tears welled up in the eyes as we pledged: "we would build up by our faith, love and labour/ God's golden city which never grows old"!

Yes, my fellow Guyanese, in the overwhelming euphoria of May 26, 1966, Guyanese felt that they could rearrange the stars! And the stars themselves indicated how far this newly independent nation could reach.

But for almost three decades after Independence, all we managed was to disarrange our internal affairs to the extent that Guyana became one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere. For many, the dreams of a prosperous Guyana, united and free, turned into a haunting nightmare.

We are warned in Holy Writ that a nation without vision will surely perish. This is as true of the nation as a whole as it is with individual persons. If our reason and imagination lose their power to conceive of and portray the future in optimistic terms, we will become cynical and develop a throwback and throw away attitude to life in the face of real and imagined pressure.

If our reason and imagination cannot conjure up a future that includes an appropriate degree of political and economic freedom, as well as an obvious confidence about the openness and trustworthiness of life, and the prospects of the good life for us, we become prey to the fundamentalism of despair and that fundamentalism breeds deviant, anti-social behaviour.

The PPP/C government is well aware of these things. This is the reason why one of its first tasks when it came to office has been to rekindle hope in our society.

Hope is the capacity to imagine what our country can be 10 years down the road, or 25 years, or 50. So concrete, compelling and realistic must that vision be, as to energize us to be so engaged in the present as to actualize that vision. Such a hope drives us to put in place those projects and programmes and to employ such building engineering and management skills to move us from where we are to where we want to be. This is what we have been about as a government.

Admittedly, we have our problems. Some we have inherited, from our colonial and undemocratic past. Others are peculiar to the times in which we live, with the phenomenon of globalisation and trade liberalization and the threat of HIV and AIDS. All of these problems have their impact on the people of our nation and from which we must continually push to rise, like the mythical phoenix rising "from the ashes of the past."

But, my fellow Guyanese, I will make bold to say that today, Guyanese can dream of a better life for themselves and their children. The hope the PPP/Civic government and progressive civil society engendered, has made this possible. And Guyanese must continue to desire the good life for their families. They must believe that an open and a better future beckons right here on this one spot on planet earth they can truly call home. And they must strive with might and main to realize that better tomorrow.

Meanwhile, those of us responsible for government and governance, must continue to plan ahead for the future, and to manage and execute those plans for the sake of that better future, in solidarity with all our people who have the capacity for endurance and hard work.

In many respects, Guyana lost decades in terms of development. October, 1992 marked another important milestone in our country's history. With the rebirth of democracy and the return to office of a freely elected government, a new phase in our national journey began. As

in any journey with a destination in mind, we must know where we are heading if we are not to become lost en route, or to become diverted from our goals.

I am quite clear in my own mind as to where the journey of our beloved country must take us. According to Professor Ali Mazrui, the first Walter Rodney Chair scholar of the University of Guyana: Development is modernization minus dependency. In the years ahead of us, our national project must continue to be the modernisation of our country.

Therefore, fellow Guyanese ours is the task of continuing to enlarge on the openness and freedom of our burgeoning democratic society. We insist that freedom and respect for human rights must be the foundation of modern Guyana, including respect for women, indigenous Guyanese and religious communities. Because modernization is as much about the values we cherish, as it is about the efforts we put into creating and distributing wealth, we must encourage the development of a culture that values openness, honesty, and transparency, freedom and responsibility.

On this important occasion, I, publicly, recommit my government to the vision of a modern nation built on solid and tested democratic values and principles.

In a modern society, all the discrete elements of ethnic and racial segmentation of political and ideological differences, of religious and cultural distinctiveness, of economic and status inequalities, are moulded and welded together into a tapestry in which the different hue of one strand only enhances that of the other, making for a most pleasing whole. In a modern society, all the different elements are made to work harmoniously, in a manner that is conducive to national progress.

That dream of a united people, across all the barriers that have historically divided us, is realizable. I believe this. Even if you do not share this dream, then allow necessity to prod you in that direction. We are too poor a country, and too small, faced with too many formidable challenges at the international level, not least of all competition in the global market-place, to be distracted by constant and costly conflict that vitiates our ability to be competitive internationally in goods and services.

I have often indicated that Guyanese generally live peacefully and harmoniously. But it is common knowledge that in the competition for political power at election time, those who are unwilling to accept the will of the people, exploit certain primal and residual fears in our population and, in the process, sow the seeds and water the plants of discontent, divisions and mistrust. This, in turn, undermines the fragility of national unity, and subvert our drive to modernization.

We have to encourage and enhance at all levels of this society, a national conversation as to how we relate to one another and how, in relating positively to one another, we contribute to and promote the national welfare. We have to ensure that each group, each class, each community, religious, civil or secular, know that it is a welcome part of a wider family, free to express its concerns and to participate in the promotion of a greater national social cohesiveness. The Ethnic Relations Commission, NGOs, Churches, Mandirs and Mosques must be willing partners in this national effort.

But, in the modern society, achievement must not be limited by factors that are remediable. There must be economic opportunity for all. And, in preparation for life the young must have the physical care, the discipline and especially the education that will allow them to seize and exploit that opportunities. No one, from accident of birth or economic circumstance, must be denied these things. If they are not available from parent or family, society must provide effective forms of care and guidance.

Ours is the task of creating a prosperous, modern society, one in which the basic needs of our people for water, health care, education and wholesome nutrition are met, where recreation facilities are available and opportunities for cultural participation are present. Our society must have the kind of transportation infrastructure that facilitate easy, inexpensive travel for personal, business and trade reasons. Other infrastructure must be there to foster growth and expansion that are conducive to the national good.

That this task is well underway, none, but the malicious and the perverse will deny. Our projects and programmes in Education and Health, Housing and Water, Poverty Reduction and Road Building and Electricity, augur well for the modern society.

But there is still a long road to travel. My Government recognize that there are many social ills to tackle. And that these cannot all be solved at once given resource constraints. But we believe that the solutions for these problems may be more readily found in a modern, dynamic country.

One of the planks of the platform of modernization must be a cheap, reliable supply of electricity. An affordable supply of electricity is as indispensable for the development of industries, as it is for the lifting of an economic burden that squats on the shoulders of our nation like an albatross. Import of fossil fuel consumes 25% of our GDP. This places a burden on consumers, and has negative implications for our balance of payment.

My government is actively pursuing projects that will hopefully result in our obtaining reliable electricity at a cheaper cost. We are exploring the possibility of obtaining wind-generated power, and we are working with potential investors in the area of hydro-electricity. We expect

to obtain 30 megawatts of electricity from co-generation by burning bagasse in Berbice associated with the anticipated modernisation of the sugar industry.

Another plank in the platform of modernisation is the development of reliable, inexpensive telecommunication services with a sufficient band-width to allow for Information Technology related services to be developed and exported. Guyana is ideally situated for a development like this, and this government is committed to it. Competition is indispensable to this development. We intend to aggressively pursue the liberalization of this sector.

The benefits of Information Technology-related services are enormous. We are poised for “E-government,” that is the Information Technology networking of government services for greater efficiency and better services to our people. Currently, programmes to link access to birth and death records and immigration and police information across the nation, are underway. In the not-too-distant future, citizens will be able to down-load valuable information, advice and services from government agencies through the internet without leaving their communities.

Greater access by schools, households and communities to information technology and the internet will close the digital divide. That project – the closing of the digital divide – is very important if Guyana is to leap-frog the evolutionary path to development, and accelerate the closure of the gap between the developed and developing nations of the world.

The closure of the digital divide, the expansion of telecommunications facilities and the availability of cheap electricity will provide the basis for transforming Education into an industry. This E-knowledge-based industry will enable our country via modern telecommunications linkages to export services rather than people. This, in turn, will help to stem the flow of migration of our young people who will not have to leave Guyana to seek new opportunities.

And, all of this will demand a radical transformation of the education sector in terms of what we teach and how we teach.

We must continue the on-going process of modernisation of our traditional industries to make these internationally competitive. At the same time, we must focus on new sectors, such as agro-processing, tourism and the exploration for petroleum, which have the potential to contribute to national development.

The traditional and the new, together with the innovative, must be managed to serve our people.

There can be no doubt as to the economic basis of the modern society. My government is committed to an economic system in which the private sector plays a lead role in wealth creation. The government has a pivotal role to play in the creation of an enabling environment, including the provision of a regulatory framework, so that investments will bring just rewards to investors, fair remuneration to workers and due revenues to the State.

Fellow Guyanese

Guyana must ensure that conditions are conducive to human safety and security. This is the role of the modern society. While, as I have said, no government can guarantee that crime does not occur, we have a duty to ensure that our citizens go about their normal duties unmolested, and without fear; that their safety is preserved, and that, as far as possible, a safe environment exists in our country, that make a rewarding life possible.

Towards this end, the government, will continue to invest in a better – equipped, professional Guyana Police Force, and in the development of a responsible network of community–policing groups.

Of no less importance is the sanctity of our territorial integrity and the security of our borders. We continue to maintain friendly and cordial ties with all our neighbours.

My fellow Guyanese: our future is pregnant with hope. The January-February floods demonstrate the capacity of our people for resilience, stout–heartedness, imagination, innovation and planning, in responding to a national crisis. Their efforts deserve our loudest praise.

If we can bring these same virtues to the project of building a modern nation in the years ahead, we will bring vision and hope to actualization. In the words of the chorus of “the Song of Guyana’s children:”

Onward, upward may we ever go

Day by day in strength and beauty grow,

Till at length we each of us may show,

What Guyana’s sons and daughters can be.

I challenge you to grasp the future with heart and mind, and with strong and willing hands as we continue to build a modern Guyana.

Happy 39th Independence greetings and best wishes to all Guyanese, everywhere!