

Address to the Nation

By

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President of the Republic of Guyana

On the Occasion of

The 44th Anniversary of Guyana's Independence

26 May 2010

Fellow Guyanese:

Forty-four years ago, thousands gathered here to watch the Golden Arrowhead fly above an independent Guyana for the first time - after a struggle for political independence waged by a people united against the oppression and exploitation of colonial rule.

That first ceremony also marked the culmination of an even more difficult struggle waged over centuries by diverse peoples, the majority dislocated from their homelands at the other side of the world, brought to these shores against their will or under great deception, deprived of every human dignity, and forced to toil under the most inhumane conditions for the enrichment of a distant continent. Theirs is a story of sacrifice on a scale that today's generations could scarcely imagine: sacrificing life to secure freedom from bondage; sacrificing historical, cultural, and emotional attachments to make this their home; and sacrificing self to secure escape, enlightenment, and upliftment for their young. The Guyana that was born forty-four years ago is the legacy of their efforts.

Today, as we celebrate yet another milestone in our young country's history, it is our first task to pay homage to the several generations of our ancestors who toiled to build the Guyana we inherited. Inspired by their journey, and ever faithful to their bequest, it is our abiding duty to continue the work they started and realise a Guyana beyond their dreams.

If that first flag-raising ceremony marked the end of old struggles, it also signalled the start of new ones: the struggle to build a new country; the struggle to establish democratic institutions and entrench democratic behaviour, the struggle to build an economy that would bring prosperity and social justice to all our people; the struggle to overcome the challenges of

smallness in size and numbers; and the struggle to forge happy and harmonious communities on the tapestry of our inherited multiculturalism. Forty years later, these struggles are still being fought. And they are being joined by new ones, including two of the defining struggles of our generation: the need to deal with the biggest global financial crisis in living memory, and the global battle to avert catastrophic climate change that now threatens life on earth as we know it.

Thanks to many of those who gathered here forty-four years ago, Guyanese today face these struggles as citizens of a proud, independent republic. But it is not the fact of independence that shapes the nature and the quality of our nation – these are shaped by the choices we make on what we do with our independence. So as we gather here tonight, we need to do more than just celebrate and cherish our independence. We need to ask ourselves if we are fulfilling our duty to make the most of independence and if we are making the right choices for our country's future – as individuals, as communities, as leaders and as a Government.

I feel proud that, as a country, we are getting the big choices right.

We have painstakingly built the strong democratic institutions that are so indispensable for ensuring accountable government and securing people's freedoms. We have delivered one of the most inclusive constitutions in the world: rejuvenated our parliamentary system; established several commissions for the protection and promotion of fundamental rights; formed sectoral committees to scrutinise Government policy and administration; expanded the mandate of the Public Accounts Committee; created an independent Audit Office; and introduced parliamentary participation in the appointment of the judicial, police, teaching, and public service commissions.

We have exercised sound and responsible macroeconomic policy choices, creating the stability that is so critical if we are to attract investment and grow our economy into the long-term. Today, our gross domestic product is several times larger than it was twenty years ago, inflation is under control, our currency is stable, our external reserves are at their highest level ever, our external indebtedness is at a sustainable level, and our fiscal deficit is declining. Over the past four years, our economy has grown by more than 4 percent a year on average. And last year, despite the financial crisis, our GDP growth rate was the highest in South America, and the second highest in all the Americas. These successes are not by accident, but because of deliberate long-term choices we have made to protect and strengthen the fundamentals of our economy.

These are the successes that lay the bedrock from which we can support the creation of a socially just and prosperous country. And when it comes to making the choices on how to do this, our values are clear: we stand on the side of hard-working citizens and families. These are

the kind of long-term choices that give definition to how we want to use our independence – and because we got most of the fundamentals right, we are in a position to move to a new set of choices and implement a second generation of reform to advance our efforts to create a socially just and prosperous Guyana.

But the task of governing our country and managing our economy is not only about making the tough long term choices; it is also about paying attention to what we do today, and how we do it, as we give meaning to the choices we have made.

We will continue to invest heavily in our people, as the surest safeguard of individual and national independence into the future, and the most immediate way to improve the everyday lives of all Guyanese. To this end, we continue to work: to deliver safe water to all our people; to expand the health care system further and to improve service delivery; to improve outcomes in our education system especially in core areas such as literacy, numeracy, the sciences, and information technology; to improve everyday security and access to justice for all our people; and to meet the needs of our most vulnerable. We have raised the ceiling for low income housing loans and brought the commercial banks to our one-stop-shop outreaches in order to improve access to financing for housing; we will shortly be launching a \$500 million programme in collaboration with a private bank to provide loans to vulnerable single parents to start small businesses; this year we will train over 3,000 persons through our national youth empowerment and entrepreneurial skills training programmes; we continue to pay water charges for every old age pensioner, and to apply a preferential electricity tariff to low volume consumers; we have started construction of a shelter for the homeless; we will spend \$1.1 billion this year to ensure that every child receives one school uniform, and a basic meal every day at school; we have established a child care and protection agency and a child abuse hotline, launched a national foster care programme, and brought all children's homes in compliance with minimum standards; and we have provided financial support to the legal aid clinic to ensure that no person is denied access to legal representation. Just yesterday, I was pleased to give my assent to one of the most progressive pieces of legislation to deal with sexual offences anywhere in the world, after our National Assembly had approved it unanimously. No sexual offender or predator should feel safe in this country any more. These actions are but a few examples of the initiatives taken by this PPP/Civic Government to improve quality of life throughout Guyana.

Even as we implement these programmes, as I indicated in my New Year's Day address, my Government will be focussing on improving the quality of public services provided to our citizens, maximising the value obtained for public money spent, and ensuring greater financial and performance accountability to the people of our country. Throughout the public sector, we will strengthen mechanisms to monitor and measure results from our government

programmes, eliminate waste and inefficiency, and ensure effective implementation of all aspects of government activity.

Fellow Guyanese:

As members of an increasingly integrated global and regional community, we are also taking our place and shouldering responsibilities on the world stage, demonstrating that we are willing both to contribute Guyanese intellectual capital and to project Guyanese values of solidarity beyond our borders. Grenada and Haiti are just two recent examples where Guyanese men and women mobilised a timely response to assist our brothers and sisters of CARICOM when they were in need.

We have likewise not hesitated to make our voice heard on the global stage on matters that affect us our interest. For example, recognising the shortcomings of the current global financial architecture and existing global institutions, especially in light of the ensuing crisis, we have been at the forefront of the argument that these institutions be reformed to make their mandates more relevant and effective, and to make the institutions more representative, responsive, and accountable.

And we were among the first people in the world to identify the urgency of dealing with climate change. Rather than be daunted by the challenge, we offered to the global community important recommendations on how to respond. We are the co-authors of the world's largest national scale forest payments scheme because of the work we have done here, others across the world are looking to us. In a few hours, I will leave for Oslo to take part in one of the most important meetings on tropical deforestation in history, where leaders from countries across the world will conclude an agreement to commit almost US\$5 billion over the next three years to the fight against deforestation and forest degradation. Guyana was at the fore from the inception in creating this partnership, and along with other forest countries, we have demonstrated that developing countries can shape the world of tomorrow.

Our Low Carbon Development Strategy is now held up as a model for the world, for how the battle against deforestation can be won, and we have been one of the leading nations in the world in our work to build a low deforestation, low carbon, climate resilient economy. Yesterday, I took part in an event to provide an update on the Low Carbon Development Strategy, and to announce the eight key priorities for the coming two years. This year, Guyana will receive between US\$30 million and US\$42 million for the climate services provided by our forest, putting us on a long-term trajectory to sell these services for far greater prices once the international climate system is put in place. This is the second largest arrangement of its type in the world, and the world's largest national scale forest payments scheme.

Over the next two years, the sale of our forests' climate services will enable us to implement a number of projects that will dramatically accelerate growth and development domestically. These include the harnessing of hydropower, expanding the digital infrastructure, and establishing world class research and educational facilities. These and other investments will catalyse the rapid transformation we seek for our economy and help to complete our transition to a truly modern and prosperous country. These are the investments that will really reduce the cost of doing business, attract large scale expansion in value added production, create thousands of jobs in new and emerging service sectors, and diversify our economy. These are the investments that will catapult our economic growth to the levels it should be, and generate increased incomes and opportunities for our people.

There are cynics who think that Guyana is not ready to make such big choices. They fail to grasp that Guyana and the world have moved on from their dated perspective, they are totally disconnected from international realities, and their stale arguments are no longer relevant. In short, they do not see that Guyana today is capable of achieving much more than we did in the past, that we are capable of aiming much higher than the generation of our parents. The future of Guyana will not be built by those who are mired in our past, but by those who focus on the opportunities to be taken, and the positive Guyanese values that can now be consolidated.

These values are needed as we face the big questions that are already creating a new agenda for the years ahead – how do we forge closer ties with our neighbours and friends like Brazil, China, and India, as emerging forces in the world economy? How do we optimise on the advantages of being a strategic bridge between CARICOM on the north and our continental neighbours on the south? How do we build on our existing educational achievements to equip our citizens for success in a digital economy? And how do we continue to play a leading role in shaping the international environment to build a fairer financial system and re-orient our economy onto a low carbon, climate resilient trajectory? And as we work out how to face these challenges, can we do so in a way that sustains progress for all of our people?

So let us remember today how far we have travelled. Let us pay tribute to the countless Guyanese who made this possible – the farmers and miners who create wealth for our country, the nurses, teachers, police and public servants who serve our people every day; our soldiers stationed in every corner of our country; our diplomats protecting our interests around the world; our NGOs fighting for global justice in Copenhagen; and our private and other non-governmental sectors.

But let us also look to tomorrow – as we increasingly turn away from the faded flags of the past, and judge ourselves by the quality of our values, the calibre of our achievements, and the strength of our resolve. Were we so to do, we would be more convinced than ever before that

the Guyanese people are making the right choices and that our independence is ever more secure.

Long live the Republic of Guyana! Happy Independence!

Thank you.