

Address by
His Excellency President Bharrat Jagdeo
on the occasion of the
45th Anniversary of Guyana's Independence
26 May 2011

Fellow Guyanese:

The Golden Arrowhead will fly proudly above us tonight as it has done on this day for forty-five years.

It flies as one of the symbols of our independent nation, as a physical reminder of our shared homeland, and as a focal point for our shared values.

These shared values define us because they represent the choices that we have made as an independent people. The values which enshrine the sovereignty of our citizens over our country. The values embedded in our belief that democracy is the only means by which we should choose our Government. The values that inform our embrace of our multi-cultural Guyanese identity. And the values that promote the idea that every Guyanese citizen should be free to secure an ever better life for themselves, their families, their communities and their country.

Our ongoing, never-ending challenge as an independent nation is to translate these timeless values into a contemporary reality for all our people.

And thanks to the hard work of today's Guyanese, our struggle to create a free, prosperous, socially just and modern Guyana continues to advance.

We have an economy that is one of the strongest in the Caribbean. We are now in the sixth consecutive year of strong economic growth – and have been one of the fastest growing economies in CARICOM every year since 2006.

Our physical infrastructure continues to be transformed. Over the past five years, our transportation network has been enriched by the Berbice Bridge, the Takutu Bridge, an international airport at Ogle, stelling, roads and canals.

We now have a digital backbone that is starting to transform internet connectivity for citizens all over the country. There are now two fibre optic cables connecting us digitally to the world, enabling the expansion of businesses and thousands of new jobs in call centres across the country.

We have better social services for our people – the educational achievements of our students are often the best in the Caribbean; our health system includes several new hospitals, hundreds of new doctors and some of the most up-to-date standards of care anywhere; and we are deepening new legal protections for the vulnerable and those who are the victims of sexual and other violence.

We are transitioning to a new economy through the implementation of our world-leading Low Carbon Development Strategy, and this year, we are investing the first US\$70 million of the payments we have received through the world's second largest forest climate services arrangement.

And we are increasingly doing this by standing on our own as a nation. Our dependence on international aid is decreasing, the contribution of the private sector to our long term future is expanding, and our standing on the international stage is higher than it has ever been.

So we are poised for the next era of progress if we choose to create it.

That will mean staying the course towards surmounting the challenges we can see today. But it will also require a strength of vision that enables us to surmount the challenges of the future that we can only partly understand right now.

Of course, our vision for Guyana still includes the need for an expanding, broadly based economy. That is why our sustained economic growth and the prudent management of public finances is enabling us to keep inflation low, our currency stable and to build our national reserves to their highest level ever, all while dealing with the greatest global financial crisis in our independent country's history.

Our vision for Guyana still needs to support the development and expansion of a vigorous and globally competitive private sector. That is why our national policies are enabling the biggest ever expansion of the private sector, the accumulation of assets, and a massive expansion of capital within the financial system.

Our vision for Guyana still needs to stay the course in modernising our traditional economic sectors, especially the sugar sector which continues on its path to recovery from the major trading shocks of recent years.

We still need to capitalise on the increasingly valuable mining sectors, while modernising them to meet high social and environmental standards, at the same time as we encourage large scale investment in oil exploration and carefully managed mines.

We still need to encourage the new emerging service sectors. Our tourism product is increasingly valued internationally. With new air access and increasing international exposure, we will see more jobs and investments in the sector. Our call centre industry has been one of the major success stories of the last ten years, with thousands of quality jobs being created

across the country. And our agricultural sector continues to diversify away from its traditional base in rice and sugar.

Of course, our vision for Guyana also enshrines the principle that economic success must be combined with social justice – this principle remains central to everything we believe in. That is why we continue to invest in education, health and other public services, that is why we continue to invest in national infrastructure, and that is why we continue to provide support to our most vulnerable citizens.

And our vision promotes our unique Guyanese culture. We have proven in recent years that we are capable of projecting that culture onto a bigger stage – through our successful hosting of the Cricket World Cup, the ICC Twenty 20, CARIFESTA X and other international cultural and sporting events. And the revival of deep-rooted aspects of our national culture has been given life through the re-printing of the Guyana Classic series and the re-opening of the Theatre Guild. These have brought new life and vitality to our national cultural landscape.

But if we are to create a Guyana that can take its rightful place among the nations of the world, then we need to upgrade our vision beyond what might have seemed innovative just ten years ago.

Instead, we need to look to a field of vision greater than we have had in the past. And the foundations we have built over the last decade and more mean that we can go out and benefit from that field of vision.

To create a Guyana that is not just free, secure, socially just and prosperous. But a Guyana that is more. A Guyana that has demonstrated how to successfully shake off the burdens of the past and move beyond a dependence on international assistance. A Guyana that understands the need to embrace the global opportunities inherent in the digital and low carbon industries that are now taking place. And a Guyana that leads the world in the

protection of natural capital, fighting climate change, and identifying how to embrace global opportunities and reform global institutions.

Part of realising that vision will be as a result of decisions already taken by the PPP/Civic Government.

The new fibre optic cable link with Brazil, and the completion of the work to liberalise our telecommunications industry, will enable further reductions in the cost of telephony and bandwidth, and revolutionise the digital access of citizens and businesses across Guyana. Our One Laptop per Family programme will equip 90,000 families to use some of the most modern technology in the world. Already, 3,000 young Guyanese are working in the call centre industry, which did not exist just 10 years ago. Our new educational channel will use modern communications to help our children advance. It is difficult to over-state how Guyana is on the threshold of a national digital revolution. In the space of five years, we will leap-frog over most countries in the world to achieve a national level of IT literacy, internet access, and fibre optic capability that is among the highest anywhere in the entire world.

By early 2015, the Amaila Falls Hydro Plant will be delivering cheaper and cleaner energy for the majority of Guyanese citizens and businesses. This will transform our national competitiveness, and as the largest investment in the history of Guyana, it will demonstrate to the world that Guyana is able to attract foreign direct investment and use that investment to catalyse large scale, world class infrastructure programmes. And it will almost eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels for energy generation, and make us one of the top twenty clean energy economies in the world.

The rest of our Low Carbon Development Strategy will bed in, as we move beyond its initial set-up phase. Just a few weeks ago, we received US\$40 million as payment for 8 million tonnes of carbon from Norway, one of the largest transactions of its kind anywhere in the world. And we expect to receive in excess of a quarter of a billion dollars in similar transactions

before 2015. This income will fund investments to continue to create the new economy we aspire to – powered by clean energy, and connected by digital world class infrastructure, built on the productive use of our human, financial and natural capital.

Just three years ago, people said that the Low Carbon Development Strategy would never come to pass. But despite a lack of progress on the climate change agenda internationally, we continue to act as a path-finder for the world, and to work our way through difficult issues that will matter for countries everywhere. We are leading the world in working out how to maintain the vast majority of our forest as a priceless global asset, while at the same time advancing the legitimate development aspirations of those who depend on it. In doing so, we are rejecting the polluting development path that so many of today's industrialised countries followed, and will ensure that our future prosperity is aligned with being one of the world's few carbon positive nations.

But we can expand our vision further still – and ensure that we sustain our reputation, not just in the fight against climate change, but also as one of the world's best bio-diversity hot-spots. In the coming months, we will establish our next two protected areas – at Shell Beach and in the Kanuku Mountains. Once this work is complete, it will bring us very close to having 12% of our national territory as protected areas – on top of the efforts we are making in our rainforest. Few countries in the world can match this record.

But despite the strategic ambition of these major imperatives, we have always said that national progress should be built on foundations which recognise that there is no incompatibility between supporting individual advancement, and promoting social justice and solidarity for all.

That is why we have chosen to provide universal free health care, free at the point of delivery and based on need, not wealth. That is why our pensioners receive more assistance

now than ever before. That is why we are distributing solar panels to 10,000 hinterland homes to enable them to access electricity for the first time ever.

And it is also why we believe in helping as many Guyanese as possible to own their own homes so that they are better placed to provide for themselves. In the last five years, not only have thousands of homes been built, but we are seeing Guyanese from overseas return home to live here. And supporting ownership is not restricted to our cities and towns. We are also working to enable all Amerindians to have collective ownership of their lands, if they request this to be done. Already, the amount of Guyana which is under Amerindian ownership has increased to 14% of our territory. The Government has committed to increase that and to address the land titling requests of every village that requests this by 2015.

Each of these decisions – from fibre optic cable to Amaila to our health system to solar panels to enabling greater house ownership – have empowered Guyanese citizens to take advantage of our national independence and create a better future. But they are not in themselves enough to create the new era of progress I speak of.

We also need to see a great expansion in the civic consciousness of all our citizens, where we recognise that the freedoms we now enjoy also confer an obligation for greater individual responsibility.

It is right that more and more Guyanese can accumulate individual wealth, establish and grow businesses, and pursue opportunities in line with their talents. But it is irresponsible to avoid paying the taxes that our country needs to provide the services we value. Healthcare, security, infrastructure development, education, support for pensioners and the disabled, and all the rest of our public services – these need a solid tax base if we want them to continue to improve.

It is right that our media is free to express their views within the law. But it is irresponsible to spread innuendo and untruths about law-abiding individuals and legitimate businesses. It is not the Government who suffers when this happens, but our entire country through a national reputation that is damaged by the desire to be sensationalist. The media should be the scourge of the corrupt, the lazy and those who break the law – but they should avoid the easy line of lies and distortions that damage those who are creating a better Guyana.

It is right that we should seek to embrace the modern world. But it is irresponsible to substitute our Guyanese sense of community with a brash individualism or lack of respect for others in a way that damages the fabric of our society. No Guyanese should be judged because of their race, religion or the way they live their lives. We have one of the most multi-cultural societies in the world, and we should be very proud of this.

If we develop this greater civic consciousness – where Government and citizens both raise their sights about the quality of nation we wish to see – then we can make the values that underpin our independence even more real for all our people.

Our field of national vision is already much greater than it was just five years ago.

Not long ago, we were content to see ourselves as a country that sought to be a progressive member of the Caribbean Community of nations.

But we are now giving voice to our national independence by choosing a far broader sense of national identity. Not just Caribbean, but South American too. Guyana is currently the Pro Tempore President of UNASUR, and our South American identity is finding practical expression in the deepening personal, business and trade linkages with Brazil and the rest of the continent.

But our identity is not limited by our regional or continental location. We are also showing that we can be relevant on the global stage.

Just think of what I have already referred to in this speech. We are one of the fastest growing economies in the Caribbean. We will soon become one of the world's top twenty economies in the use of clean energy. We are within two or three years of becoming one of the world's top economies in the use of modern communications technology. We already have the world's second largest forest protection scheme.

How many countries of less than 800,000 people have the national courage to aim so high?

All Guyanese can be proud of how far we have come – it pays tribute to the fact that our people are open to ideas and influences from the world outside our borders, and capable of thinking as big as anybody anywhere.

But we can be more than proud. We have embraced an international agenda that many think is too complicated for so-called developing countries. And in doing so, we have demonstrated that we are capable of shaping this agenda.

This international engagement is key to our next era of progress. In the past, we saw what happens when we isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. But if instead, we combine the vision and courage to integrate with our neighbours and the wider world with the greater civic consciousness I speak of, we will create a far better life for our citizens at home.

So that next era of progress awaits – if Guyana chooses to embrace it.

But it will not be my job to lead you.

This year, I will be proud to be the first President in Guyana's history to hand on the Presidency because of the constitutional term limits I signed into law.

A new President will stand in this place on Independence Day next year, as a consequence of the elections which will take place before the end of this year. Inevitably, the run up to those elections will see much passion, debate and contestation of ideas. This competition is healthy and in the nature of democracies everywhere. It is a robust national conversation that should be embraced, not shunned. But once it has taken place, our country will unite again behind our new President, who will take over the responsibilities of stewarding our nation towards its next era of progress.

And when you gather here next year, you should see in that new President the embodiment of our independent democracy, and the individual expression of the peaceful transfer of power that demonstrates our national democratic maturity.

The new President will be bequeathed a national landscape that would be unrecognisable to those who stood here 45 years ago. But I know that the President will draw daily strength from the inspiration of the Guyanese people, because that has been my source of strength for the last almost twelve years.

Serving the people of Guyana as your President has been the greatest honour of my life. As I depart, my faith in the people of this country is as high as it was on the day I took office. I am proud of this country, and of the unity that binds us together. Our Guyanese blood has always united us; the artificial divisions of ethnicity and religion should never get in the way of seeing that fundamental fact. Never forget what a great country this is – our friendliness, hospitality and compassion are un-equalled in the world. And never stop believing that our best days have still to come. In the years ahead, wherever I am, whatever I am doing, I will always be thinking of Guyana and ready to support my country and people. But I will do so as a Guyanese citizen, loyal to whomever the people of Guyana choose as our President. And I will do so with

great pride in all that we have achieved together, and with great hope for all that is yet to come.

Fellow Guyanese:

For the last time as your President, I say Happy Independence Day.

Long live the Republic of Guyana

Thank You