

What's the meaning of Independence to Barbados? What have we achieved? What should we aim for?

Typically, 'independence' in the context of a country refers to achieving a state of self-governance, freedom from control of a monarch or superior power and the capability and maturity to make critical decisions in the people's best interest. In the Barbadian society, however, the meaning of 'independence' extends far beyond a systematic change in governance. Hence there are numerous constructs that must be examined when seeking to answer the questions: "What is the meaning of 'independence' to Barbados? What have we achieved? And what we should aim for?"

First, the idea of 'independence' takes on several connotations across our landscape. For many, 'independence' is synonymous with a season of reflection, one month a year, November, when we take time to remember our heritage, and acknowledge the handiwork and craftsmanship of select individuals who paved the road to 1966. Others identify 'independence' as a burst of cuisine, culture and camaraderie. Somehow, cornmeal, pumpkin, coconut, okras, flour, available all year round, by the way, come out of hiding and fuse to make delicious treats like cou-cou, conkies, bakes and sugar cakes. Of course, one cannot address culture, without folk-songs, old tales, tuk band and Bajan characters, as they resurface for their annual showcase. For the sentimental, 'independence' is the stream of colours – blue, yellow and black – and the uniformed detachments doing their march pass on the Garrison Savannah or the Bridgetown Port, replicating that first parade in 1966.

Further, for others, independence is a period of discovery, as children's minds are infused with knowledge of Barbadian history and the more mature seek to answer the question, "What can I do for my country?" For Bajans, independence can often be summed up by our symbols, icons and patriotism. The national flag, the coat-of-arms, the motto, the 'Father of Independence' and the pledge come to bear a significant meaning and importance. If only for just once a year with arms at our side, we lustily sing 'both' verses of the National Anthem. More critically though, at the heart of every Barbadian, 'independence' symbolises the competence, confidence and commitment of the people making up these one-hundred and sixty-six square miles, to chart our own course, to "write our names on history's page". This latter meaning is made abundantly clear, when we ask the question "What have we achieved?"

Along that vein, His Excellency Kofi Annan, Past Secretary General of the United Nations, on the occasion of the opening of United Nations House here in Barbados in 2002, was moved to say “Barbados is one of small island states which continues to punch above its weight”. Indeed, as the world grappled with the challenges of the dawn of a new century, it was inspiring for a small developing territory such as Barbados to receive such an affirmation. Quite appropriately, several of our achievements can be linked to the goals set out by the United Nations. A major cornerstone of the Barbadian society is the importance of education. Operating on the vision of Sir Errol Walton Barrow, and other stalwarts in the education sector, Barbados has achieved one of the highest literacy rates in the world. It is this value that has led to the broadening of the middle class, increase in social mobility and a need for each citizen to achieve his or her highest potential. Consequently, Barbados has produced several scholars, academics and professionals from the likes of Rhodes Scholars Sir Marston Gibson and Ms Chloe Walker, renowned economist The Honourable Owen Arthur to the twenty-seven scholarship and exhibition winners this year, 2016. These individuals are products of an effective education system, which is not only mandatory, but also free at the primary and secondary level.

Furthermore, Barbados has achieved a status of leadership within the Caribbean region, never mind our geographical size as compared to other territories. Barbados is not only home to United Nations Latin America and the Caribbean branch but also the Regional Security System, Caribbean Disaster and Emergency Management Agency, Caribbean Examinations Council and several service organisations. This puts Barbados at the core of policy making decisions which impact the entire Caribbean region. Especially when presented with the disasters which pose a threat to our region, our strategic role in implementing disaster preparedness plans has fostered altruism and a sense of selflessness within the Barbadian community, in itself an achievement. Barbados is usually the first to send volunteers, security teams, rescuers and aid to neighbouring islands in times of crisis – Grenada, after Hurricane Ivan, Dominica 2015 and Haiti this year after Hurricane Matthew. Similarly, Barbados is often lauded for its healthcare system, which continues to offer quality care to residents, free of cost in some instances. This reality is not the case in many other islands or developing states around the world. Barbados is meeting international standards, as it joins the World Health Organisation in striving to achieve Universal Healthcare for all.

Additionally, Barbados has achieved endless success in the spectrum of music. Pillars such as Nicholas Brancker and Mighty Gabby, to the world-renowned Rihanna have made their mark on the world, showing that Barbados is more than just about academic success. As of recent,

Barbadians have been performing extremely well on the sporting stage, some qualifying for the Olympics and receiving scholarships to international universities. Barbados is the nurturing ground for phenomenal talent and prowess. Even in the Tourism sector, Barbados has achieved the interest of several luxury hotel chains and has earned numerous awards for Hospitality, Best Spa and one of the Top Ten Most Beautiful Beaches in the World. Truly, we have accelerated beyond a point of dependency to actualisation, and as a society we are accomplishing goals, some of which, we had not even set out for ourselves. However, there is more for us to improve and achieve as a nation, in this ever changing world.

Celebrated Barbadian novelist, George Lamming once penned "The architecture of our future is not only unfurnished: the scaffolding has hardly gone up." This statement does not undermine the efforts of our forefathers, but rather appeals to us to do more to safeguard our future. It is paramount that we assess our current state of affairs, and make the necessary adaptations to create a sustainable future. Thus we must ask ourselves, "What should we aim for?" One of our major objectives must be to secure our communities and our nation by extension, from the ravages of crime. To accomplish this, we must tackle the issue at its core. The reality is that some young people are engaging in lawless activities inevitably leading them to lives in and out of prison, with few opportunities to escape their already desperate situations. There are measures that we have to take to reduce the levels of crime and develop more prosperous young men and women, particularly in providing more funding for tertiary level education, which many young persons cannot afford; education is the only way for them to elevate themselves out of a situation of unemployment and poverty.

Consequently, when we foster a populous educated up to the tertiary level, we reduce incidents of crime and create a safer image, integral for a sustainable tourism product, one that we must continue to solidify. Though we have made progress in this area, it is marginal compared to what we ought to be offering for a tourism-dependent territory. Since we all share the space on these 166 square miles of land, as individuals, we need to beautify our surroundings, create innovative ways to indicate the various communities that exist and contribute to creating more tourist-friendly amenities. We must also market our distinct culture, not only at 'independence time', but as a permanent fixture of our tourism product, and pursue the title "country of choice for travel". Equally, we must assiduously pursue upgrades from Credit Rating Corporations such as Moody's, which have a significant impact on business and trade outside of our borders. Most importantly, we must work to abate the issues plaguing our citizens, such as long waits at the Accident and Emergency Department of the

Hospital, dearth of available ambulances, extended water outages and poor living conditions. In a similar sense, we must make efforts to prevent the effects of Non-Communicable Diseases and finally dispose the title "Diabetes Land".

In conclusion, 'Independence' as a concept may have several different connotations. But, one glaring fact remains, that in the Barbadian context, 'independence' is the flame glowing in each citizen, which symbolises our duty to be "strict guardians of our heritage, firm craftsmen of our fate." While we revel in our successes and achievements as a nation, we have to work diligently to safeguard our future and to continue our legacy as "the Lord" continues to be "the people's guide" for the next fifty years and beyond!