



**FIFTY YEARS OF CARIBBEAN INDEPENDENCE:
The Future of Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago**

by

Franklin W. Knight

Leonard and Helen R. Stulman Professor of History at John Hopkins University

Keynote Lecture for
50 Years of Independence: A Colloquium to Mark Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago's Fifty
Years of Independence from Britain

Organized by CERLAC (Centre for Research on Latin America & the Caribbean) &
YCEC (York Centre for Education & Community)

Held on November 2, 2012 in Toronto, Canada

CERLAC Colloquia Paper

November 2012

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Introduction

As we gather here today we are mindful that this is an auspicious occasion. Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago are commemorating the fiftieth anniversaries of their political independence. It is a milestone that deservedly calls for some assessment along with the commemoration and celebrations. Yet we must be modest in our appraisal. Let us admit at the very beginning that 50 years is not a very long time for either mankind or for a nation. And in the case of a nation, not very long at all.

Many of us in his august room are more than fifty years old. And with life expectancies reaching toward 80 years, many of us hope to be around for many more years. If we can talk about ourselves with such optimistic expectancy, then certainly we can also speak of countries in that way. But do not expect me to come praising the past and predicting bountiful tomorrows. That is not my duty. I was invited to share with you some sober reflections about where we were and where we are going and how well we are equipping ourselves for the journey.

What is past is past. About the past we can do nothing. We cannot change it. We can only seek to draw the lessons and wisdom of our ancestors and hope that future generations will be kind to us. Unless we are realistic about ourselves and our past then we will not build the sort of future that posterity will cherish. This is not the time to wallow in nostalgic reminiscences about how good life was, or, to recall that famous poem by Nicolás Guillén, "*Whatever Time is past was Worse*." It is not societies get better or worse. It is just that get to be different. History does not follow a linear path. Nor do different societies follow a common route. So no two societies can ever be the same.

For many countries fifty years is like

the blinking of an eye. It is an extremely short time. And that is our first observation tonight.

The countries about which we will speak tonight, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago are still, as nation states, in their early infancies. They have time on their hands. And, as the South African proverb says: "Time is longer than rope." What have Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago accomplished in their first fifty years; and what are the challenges for the next fifty years and more? Have they, as some would proclaim, seen their best years? Have they, as Edward Gibbon Wakefield once described the United States in the 1830, "a country rotten before it is ripe"? And although both states derive from a common colonial lineage, are they destined to follow the same path in the future?

It is clear that the two states have quite a different history, although both have been since 1797 parts of the British Empire. Moreover they have different population composition. Jamaica was captured from the Spanish in 1655 and illustrates that timing and circumstances are enormously important in the genesis of a people as well as a state. Jamaica had some experience with a semi-autonomous colonial legislature until 1865. Trinidad was brought into the empire and subordinated to Crown Colony Government. Jamaica was a classic example of the sugar plantation society. Trinidad was not. And the legacies clearly demonstrate the divergent paths of the two territories. Indeed, it can be said that Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, despite their common legacy of British colonialism, developed two different political cultures by the middle of the twentieth century when universal adult suffrage was introduced.

But I am not here to rehearse those past island histories. After all, I do think that the histories, while definitely not irrelevant, are not inordinately relevant to the contemporary situation of the two colonies. I am here to review the achievements during the past fifty years of political independence and on the basis of some observations, to try to hazard what the future might hold for both states.

Section I: Fifty Years of Accomplishment

As curious as this might sound, Jamaica as well as T&T have accomplished much in their first fifty years. In the first place, they have survived politically in a reasonably stable domestic political situation. That is not a bad achievement for these perilous times. Let me briefly list 5 areas in which Jamaica and T&T have made significant (though not unqualified) progress over the past fifty years. To put that in perspective, I will look at some contrasting initial fifty-year accomplishments (if that is an acceptable term for what they did.)

1. Political Stability

In its first fifty years the United States had, among other transgressions of political tranquility:

- Faced down a Whiskey rebellion,
- Witnessed the dueling death of one of its important founders of Caribbean ancestry,
- Fought a major war with its former metropolis (the war of 1812),
- And, was on the point of tearing itself apart on the issue of slavery.

Altogether that was a quite inauspicious start for the country that pioneered political engineering in 1776 and pontificated about human rights toward the end of the eighteenth century.

Ghana, the pride of African states that gained their independence at the middle of the last century – and was an inspiration to so many new states then—had its founder overthrown just ten years after independence. And it took a long time for Ghana to recover political stability.

If we compare the general Latin American experience during the nineteenth

century, only Chile and Brazil have records comparable to those of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago during the first fifty years of political independence.

Compared with many modern countries, Jamaica has been not only politically stable but also, on the surface at least, politically democratic. Since 1962 Jamaica has had 12 national general elections – all except the 1983 elections at regular intervals. Of these 12, the PNP won 7 (including 4 in a row) and the JLP 5. Nevertheless, the political system is fraught with a number of challenges that must be successfully overcome if fifty years from today our successors are to be optimistic about their future. Political stability, however, is relative; and as we shall discuss shortly, the Jamaica political problems are approaching the monumental.

Despite the challenges to the Trinidad & Tobago political system in 1970 and 1990, (and something happened last year that we are still not certain about) one would also have to conclude that that state also enjoyed relative political stability during the first fifty years of its independence. T & T has had 14 general elections since independence – all but four (1986), 1995, 2000, and 2010) won by the People's National Movement founded by Eric Williams. T&T had elections in 2000, 2001, and 2002 – the last two were short-term elections – that is elections called before the full five years. Both Jamaica and T&T have, for better or for worse – and in many ways it does seem for worse – institutionalized the two-party system to the severe detriment to developing a wider democratic society that would enable every citizen to be the best that he or she can be.

We will speak more later of that.

2. Civil Society

Both Jamaica and T&T have done well in the construction of civil society since independence. There have been no major civil conflicts. There are no institutionalized patterns of segregation or discrimination or exclusions and Jamaicans as well as *Trinibagonians* have a very strong sense of their

national identity. Not only is Jamaica quite diverse – in any normal connotation of the word – but it also takes diversity for granted. In an age when migration is looming as a major problem for many, Jamaica healthily continues to accept migration as normative.

The same can be said, and perhaps even more so, of Trinidad and Tobago. T&T is 40% South Asian; 37.5% African; 20.5% mixed; and 2% from all parts of the globe. This diversity extends to religious practice. T&T is 26% Roman Catholic; 25.8% Protestant; 22% Hindu; 5.8% Muslim; and another 19.9% practicing a variety of religions or no religion at all.

Jamaica, like all the countries of the western hemisphere, is a country of immigrants. Two constants in the history of Jamaica have been migration and revolution. People have forever been coming to Jamaica and leaving Jamaica. The basic population is predominantly of African origin but the whole world is reflected in the Jamaican population: Africans, Indians, Chinese, Lebanese, Syrian, English, Scottish, Irish, Welch, and German.

Today Jamaica receives a small but steady stream of migrants from China, Cuba, Haiti, Colombia and other countries near and far. About 20,000 Latin Americans reside in Jamaica. About 7,000 permanent residents in Jamaica come from the USA. Jamaica is hospitable to all foreigners. The island is far from being a paradise but race color and origin do not constitute major factors for discrimination. And like the rest of the Caribbean, Jamaica shares a revolutionary past that permeates the structure of society and values. It endured a revolution in colonialism; a series of interrelated sugar revolutions; a demographic revolution; and the revolutionary transformation of the post-slavery societies as Michele Johns and Brian Moore have been skillfully and insightfully examining for the past few years.

3. Education

Despite much comment about the declining quality of education in Jamaica, the system is well structured and is quite impressively calibrated. The pre-primary, primary secondary and tertiary levels are expanding

despite enormous economic challenges and a social climate that has manifested signs of breaking down. For a population of less than 3 million inhabitants, Jamaica supports five universities as well as a number of higher-level technical training facilities.

Trinidad and Tobago with a population of slightly more than 1.2 million supports 3 well-established universities – The UWI St. Augustine, The University of Trinidad and Tobago; and the University of the Southern Caribbean. It might also be possible to include in this list, the Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies. And both territories have several higher-level educational establishments. And in both countries women appear to have more years of schooling than men -- 12 years for women and 11 for men in T&T; and 15 and 13 in Jamaica.

4. Culture and Sports

Since 1962 the Jamaica has distinguished itself in culture and sports. The production in creative literature, art, drama, dance, and music has been universally recognized. Go anywhere in the world and Jamaican reggae music and musicians like Bob Marley and Burning Spear, Jamaican cuisine like patties and jerk dishes and Jamaican products like Appleton Estate rum, Red Stripe beer, Pickapeppa sauce and Tia Maria liqueur are readily recognized and wholesomely appreciated.

In sports Jamaica has also distinguished itself in the past fifty years. In track and field Usain Bolt is merely the brightest star in a large sporting constellation. Presently Jamaican sprinters have run more sub-10 second 100 meters races than all the rest of the world combined. And Jamaicans have made history in cricket, bobsled, baseball, basketball, soccer and rugby.

Very much the same can be said of Trinidad and Tobago. While athletics, cricket, and soccer might be a bit behind the standards of Jamaica – after all, no other country can boast of a Usain Bolt – the musical and literary culture of Trinidad probably exceeds that of Jamaica. The steel orchestra is a Trinidadian invention.

Pichakaree, Parang, Soca, and Calypso provide a musical repertoire and history that is as rich as any elsewhere in the Americas. Trinidad has a Nobel Laureate in literature; and the intellectual caliber of Eric Williams and C.L.R. James may perhaps be equaled but are unsurpassed anywhere else in the Caribbean.

5. Public health

Finally, the island has a fairly good public health system. The Jamaica life expectancy rates are 75.3 for females and 71.8 for males – a slight decline recently but quite an improvement over the 1950s. The infant mortality rate of 14.6 per 1000 gives the island a world ranking of 103. That does not appear too striking until some comparisons are made. The Jamaica rate is better than many of its Caribbean neighbors such as Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and most of the Central American States, as well as Brazil, China, and Saudi Arabia. Trinidad has a life expectancy rate of 74.6 years for females and 68.8 years for men.

Section II: The Challenges

The challenges to their political independence and their national sovereignty have not been identical for Jamaica and for Trinidad and Tobago.

In the first decade or so after political independence, Jamaica was enjoying the same favorable economic winds of most of the rest of the world. Throughout the Americas the 1960s were considered the decade of rising expectations. Prices for exports were good. Domestic food supplies were ample. Wage increases generally exceeded price increases; and the middle sectors expanded significantly. But since about the 1970s, the economic winds have been generally unfavorable to Jamaica as well as much of the rest of the world. And the economic problems have exacerbated the institutional inadequacies with

which Jamaica began its independent political existence. The challenges to politics, the economy, and civil society have been severe, multiple, interrelated, sometimes unexpected, and occasionally disastrous.

Trinidad and Tobago have been more fortunate in their natural resources and have been better served in their developmental policies since independence. The petroleum industry has permitted T&T to better weather the severe economic downturns of the 1970s, 1980s and post 2000 eras. Oil and natural gas account for about 40% of GDP, 80% of exports and 5% of employment. T&T is a major manufacturing center in the Caribbean as well as a major investment center. With half the land area and about half the population, T&T has roughly the same GDP as Jamaica – equivalent to twice the per capita GDP of Jamaica. What are the challenges to political independence and a democratic and meritocratic society in both Jamaica and T&T?

I see 4 major challenges: 1) the problem of economic sustainability, 2) the problem of equality or meritocracy in a civil society, 3) the problem of political succession and institution building, and 4) the global problem of narco-trafficking and civil violence.

1. Economic Sustainability

As elsewhere in this increasingly globalized world, political stability is closely affiliated with economic sustainability. So everywhere across the Caribbean, given the relatively limited natural resources, each Caribbean state will need to be untiring and increasingly creative in the pursuit of economic sustainability. Perhaps each state will, after all the fits and starts, find efficacy in cooperativeness, not necessarily as a confederated or unified system like the European Community but rather in selected avenues of pragmatic economic activity. As John Donne said so long ago: “No man is an island unto itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” Jamaicans do not respond well to John Donne’s exhortation. But before Jamaica pushes for regional cooperation it must first put its economic house in order.

Since independence Jamaica has not done a good job of planning for anything. There is a pervasive confidence that things will just work out by themselves. The politicians pride themselves in ineptitude and there are no formal structures as one finds in many successful small countries like Singapore, Mauritius, Madeira or Costa Rica for structurally advising the government on short term and long term plans or the costs versus benefits of public policy implementations.

In Jamaica today the most popular form of public economic policy appears to be a sort of perpetual mendicancy – a policy that already seems patently insupportable with a debt to GDP ratio of 130% -- fifth in the world behind Zimbabwe (230), Japan (208), St. Kitts/Nevis (200), Greece (165), and Lebanon (137). In any case, borrowing does not appear to be an efficacious self-sustaining economic strategy. For Trinidad, the future also looks grey. While oil and oil products are presently important, that market could turn topsy-turvy if the United States achieves oil self-sufficiency and Brazil and China become major oil exporters.

2. Equality or Meritocracy in a Civil Society

Not only will Jamaica and T&T have to construct a sustainable economy insulated somewhat from the world economy, but they will have to struggle to establish and maintain economic equity and democratic equality as appears to be the case in some regional states like Bermuda, the Bahamas and Barbados. Nevertheless in some states like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago and Guyana inequality persists stubbornly. Without ameliorating the conditions of the majority who are poor there is not much hope for the minority who are rich. In this respect T&T with its superior resources and regular budget surpluses, seems to be doing better at establishing equality than Jamaica.

Civil society in Jamaica is threatened by manifest cases of social injustice, or perceived social injustice. The failure of successive governments to bridge the awesome gap between the “haves” and the

“have not” partially contributed to the proliferation of political “dons” and garrison communities largely outside the law.

3. Political Succession and Institution Building

Political succession is a major regional problem. Neither in the stable democracies of the former English colonies nor in Cuba has the problem of political succession been properly institutionalized. The political parties in Jamaica, Trinidad/Tobago, and Guyana seem to have problems attracting new, young members who should vitalize the systems. This is what in their day youngsters such as Edward Seaga, Ken Jones and David Tavares did for the Jamaica Labour Party in the late 1950s; and what, despite their legacies, Michael Manley and P.J. Patterson did for the People’s National Party in the early 1970s. They revitalized their parties. Nothing like that has happened since in these two parties in Jamaica.

Apart from the problem of political succession Jamaica and T&T have a number of other political problems: accountability; transparency; empowerment of the masses; the lack of an independent, responsible, competent media; and effective political representation. Time does not allow me to develop all these points so I hope that we can return to them in the open discussion.

Trinidad has had a constitutional reform since its independence and established a Republic within the British Commonwealth in 1976. But much of the British political veneer remains – the first past the post in elections; the Privy Council; and an unquestioned respect for British traditions.

Clearly Jamaica has not done much structured political thinking since 1962 so now may be the time to think seriously about the nature of political representation.

- Does the island really need a Governor General? And how do Jamaicans reconcile the present Seventh Day Adventist GG with the Queen’s position as titular head of the British Church of England?
- Is Parliament too big?

- Should proportional representation be tried?
- Are the two major parties beyond their prime?
- Should devolution to local authorities at the county or parish levels be examined?
- How can political participation be revived?
- Is the imitation British Parliamentary model the most useful for the island fifty years after independence?
- Given the overwhelming problems, should Jamaica call time out from regular competitive elections and try something new? For example, a government of national unity for eight years in which the candidates with the highest number of votes, irrespective of their party form the government.

4. Narcotic Trafficking and Civil Violence

International Narcotic trafficking presents a major challenge for all Caribbean states. The financial resources of the major drug dealers dwarf those of most Caribbean states – maybe even all the states combined. Over the past few years then, there has been a noticeable deterioration in law and order with a corresponding frightful increase in civil disorder and domestic drug addiction in both Jamaica and T&T – but truthfully all across the Americas.

The inordinately high cost of resisting the constant undermining of the independence and sovereignty of Caribbean states weakens their individual and collective ability to improve the general conditions of daily living for their populations. Of that there can be no doubt. Moreover, the soaring costs of law and order drain scarce resources that could be more meaningfully deployed in other needy areas such as education, public health, and physical infrastructure.

The major challenges to political

independence lie in conditions of the present and the future. The political leaders since 1962 have not lived up to the challenges. They have not served their states well. They have not innovated. Where they have led it is without vision and without respect for the basic condition of the masses. Often the models they have followed have been inadequate for the expanding needs of their states. The constant laments about legacies of slavery, or imperialism, or colonialism or globalization do not feature prominently in my diagnosis of challenges to the construction of a better Caribbean. As William Shakespeare once expressed it in Julius Caesar, “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings.”

The various independent Caribbean states cannot, and must not, depend on outsiders to chart their futures. They must take control of their destiny. And this is a matter of the utmost urgency. To do so they must be tough, and creative and resilient. Salvation and defense will come not from outsiders, not from their stars, but from within, from themselves. That is largely what Caribbean history patently manifests.

But there is another observation. The Caribbean states cannot hope to do well and defend their independence if they fail to find virtue in regional cooperation. These are not the times when every unit can chart a successful course solely by itself. It is imperative to come together for the greater regional good. As the famous saying, attributed to many as diverse as the English Parliament of 1642, and Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine in 1776, goes, “If we do not hang together we will certainly hang separately.”

But as I said at the beginning we are still in the political youth of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and indeed of the modern Caribbean so I remain extremely confident that the best days are yet to come.

Thank you.

Appendix A

Letter from Dr. Vidhya Gyan Tota-Maharaj, Consul General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in Toronto, provided for reading as an introduction to the keynote lecture



CONSULATE GENERAL OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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November 01, 2012

August 31st, 2012 marked a milestone in the history of the beloved twin island of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago as we celebrated fifty (50) years of Independence. This year also marks fifty (50) years of diplomatic relations between Canada and Trinidad and Tobago which is indeed remarkable in itself. Trinidad and Tobago gained Independence from Great Britain on August 31st, 1962 and at midnight the Union Jack (British Flag) was lowered and the national flag of Trinidad and Tobago was hoisted for the first time.

Since gaining Independence on August 31, 1962, Trinidad and Tobago has progressed from mere political independence to building and developing the socio-economic infrastructure of our nation to establishing and consolidating our identity as one nation and one people.

Our people have excelled in all spheres of life - sports, medicine, education, academia, arts and culture etc. breaking records - cricket, athletics, winning nobel laureates, beauty pageants and our gifts to the world-steelpan, calypso, Carnival and limbo. We have shown the world that various ethnic groups can peacefully coexist in harmony.

The celebration of Trinidad and Tobago's Independence was indeed a momentous day for us as it symbolised our strong democratic values, stability and strength as a nation. It is against this backdrop that Trinidad and Tobago and Canada established diplomatic relations in 1962 and have since maintained fifty (50) years of this longstanding relationship and for this we are proud!

As a young nation, having emerged from the confines of colonialism, we continue to strive towards prosperity, peace and security. The resilience and determination of our People, our respect for diversity and our commitment to nation building will remain the main pillars of the Sovereign country that we are so proud of.


/f/ Consul General