

Transcript of the address by His Excellency, Brigadier David Granger, President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, on the occasion of Guyana's 50th Anniversary of Independence May 26, 2016

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President David Granger:

Fellow Guyanese,

Guyana gained its Independence from Great Britain on the 26th May 1966 after more than 350 years of Dutch and British rule. Guyana was first colonized by the Dutch and, eventually, was ceded to Great Britain in 1814. The three colonies - Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice - were united as British Guiana 185 years ago.

Our forebears came from the continents of Africa, Asia and Europe and encountered the indigenous people of the continent of South America. They laid the foundation for creating a unique, new nation on these shores. They yearned for freedom.

Guyanese today pay homage to the contributions of our ancestors whose rebellion reinforced their resolve to confront the greatest of adversities and overcome their most dangerous adversaries. The struggle for freedom was long and hard and the achievement of Independence was a triumph of will and grit. Independence was the culmination of centuries of resistance by generations of forebears.

The militancy of peasants in their villages, of labourers on the plantations, of workers in their unions and of 'patriotic' professionals in their councils inspired the fight for self-determination and 'nationhood'. The empowerment of the disenfranchised masses through the advocacy of mass-based organizations; the attainment of universal adult suffrage and the achievement of constitutional reforms combined to intensify the demand for self-determination and Independence.

Guyanese today pay tribute to the generations of men and women who were part of this historic and heroic struggle for self-determination. We can enjoy freedom today because of their consciousness, their courage and their commitment to the cause of freedom.

We pay homage to all those who were part of this process. We recall the martyrs of the Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo revolts during the dark era of enslavement. We recall the martyrs of the protests at Leonora, Devonshire Castle, Rose Hall, Ruimveldt and Enmore, during and after the era of indentureship. We recall the labours of Hubert Critchlow, Cheddi Jagan, Forbes Burnham, Peter D'Aguiar and Stephen Campbell, which eventuated in national Independence.

Guyanese, today, honour our Heads of State – David Rose, the first Guyanese Governor General and his successor Edward Luckhoo and Arthur Chung, our first President – for their civility and for the stability which their office imparted to our young state.

Our people's ardent aspiration and arduous struggle for political Independence moulded our national identity. Independence infused the qualities of audacity and tenacity in our people. It fortified our determination to be masters of our own destiny. It created new institutions on which to erect the pillars of a new nation.

Independence allowed us to adopt our own symbols of nationhood – our national anthem; our national awards; our national coinage and stamps; our national motto; our national festivals; our national flag; our national monuments and all other national emblems.

Guyanese, today, are proud of these symbols, which define our identity and which differentiate us from all other nations. They exemplify our self-esteem. They are revered and will forever remain objects of national pride.

Independence created the need for new institutions to preserve our achievements, to promote the development of our nation and to protect our peoples' rights. We created our own Court of Appeal as our highest court. We refashioned our public and police services to ensure a better quality of life and human safety. We established the Guyana Defence Force to stand guard over our country's territory. We improved access to education, electricity, health care, housing and potable water. We established massive agricultural, drainage and irrigation schemes, and industrial estates to put our people to work. We created institutions to provide social protection such as the National Insurance Scheme. We created banking institutions to promote savings and provide credit for our people.

Guyana, in a relatively short period of time after Independence, improved our economy to provide a higher standard of living for our people. Successive administrations, throughout the past five decades, have continued to add to our national assets and to extend our public infrastructure.

We are proud of our achievements over the past 50 years. We are proud of our efforts to deliver our people from the dreary logies, shanties and tenement yards and to open the doors to family homes. We are proud of having established a University of Guyana, a College of Education, multilateral schools and technical institutes that expanded access to education for our children throughout the Ten Administrative Regions.

We achieved all of these things and more even as we faced threats to our territoriality and to internal national integrity. We resisted threats to more than two-thirds of our territory by Suriname

and Venezuela for 50 years. We repelled an incursion into a large part of our country claimed by Suriname. We suppressed an internal insurrection in the Rupununi. Our nation has faced tribulations. Our people's unity, our will and our strength, enable us to overcome these threats.

Guyanese, today, exult in their achievements and accomplishments of the past 50 years. We are proud of the men and women who led us on our journey, thus far, as an independent nation. The excellence of their service brought honour to our nation.

Guyanese, today, pay homage to their heroes and honour their cultural, sporting and academic heritage on this 50th Anniversary of Independence.

The works of our artists, composers, dancers, dramatists and writers; the talents of our sportsmen and women; the brilliance of our scholars and the labours of our working people will never be forgotten. These men and women inspired us to believe that no objective was unattainable. We became aware that we were capable of becoming champions on the international stage. Their achievements are a constant reminder that small size should not mean a dearth of talent.

Guyana, once independent, embarked on a progressive foreign policy to protect its vital national interests. It bestrode the international stage with composure and posture which belied economic wealth or military might. Our leaders, however, had the vision to pioneer the formation of the Caribbean Free Trade Area, the Caribbean Community and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States and also to play leading roles in the Non-Aligned Movement and the United Nations.

Guyanese, today, recall their audacious and principled stance in support of the liberation of colonial territories and the termination of apartheid in South Africa. They took pride in these achievements, which were led by a corps of outstanding diplomats.

Guyanese, today, pay tribute to their leaders, who had the vision to have guided and the endurance to have sustained the nation during these past 50 years. We recognise the contributions of our eight Presidents – Arthur Chung, Forbes Burnham, Desmond Hoyte, Cheddi Jagan, Samuel Hinds, Janet Jagan, Bharrat Jagdeo and Donald Ramotar – in leading this nation over these difficult years.

Guyana's Golden Jubilee is an opportunity to plan ahead. We must create a country that will fulfil our obligations to our children and generations to come. We look ahead to our next 50 years and to the challenge of realising the 'good life' for all of our citizens.

Independence is our birth right. Independence vested in us the duty to protect our nation and to pursue the best interests for all generations. Independence came with the responsibility to lay the

building-blocks of sustained national human development. Independence imposed on us the duty to ensure that we bequeath to our children and grandchildren an even better country than the one which we inherited from our forebears.

The 'good life' means the absence of poverty. It means the presence of equality and the creation of an enlightened citizenry through education. It means effective stewardship of our natural resources and the creation of employment for our people. Our mission for the next 50 years must be to expand our economy, to ensure equality, to improve education, to protect the environment and to provide employment for all.

Guyana is not a resource-poor country. Guyanese ought not to be a poor and dispossessed people. Our country is endowed with bountiful resources – both human and natural – to banish poverty forever. We have always been known to possess the values of self-sacrifice and solidarity.

Guyana is committed to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which obligate us to end poverty in all of its forms. We have pledged to eradicate extreme poverty and to halve all other forms of poverty by 2030.

Guyana, in order to achieve these goals, must realign its economy to generate the wealth that would allow for poverty reduction. We must improve and sustain higher economic growth in order to raise our entire population out of the depths of extreme poverty.

Guyana's economy will be enriched by the discovery of petroleum. We look forward to preparing our people and the economy for the exploitation of this rich resource. We shall create a sovereign wealth fund to ensure that all generations benefit from the gains that are expected to flow from this discovery.

Our national economy must be reshaped to reduce our dependence on the six sisters – bauxite, fish, gold, rice, sugar, and timber. Guyana's economic policy over the next four years will be determined by the transition to greater value-added production.

Independence engendered expectations that the inequalities which characterized colonial society would be eradicated. We have made progress in ensuring greater opportunities for our people. We will continue to demolish class and geographic inequalities, especially between coastland and hinterland, between urban and rural communities.

Guyana's hinterland possesses its richest natural resources. The hinterland, despite this endowment, remains underdeveloped, plagued by poor infrastructure and environmental

hazards. The disparities in development and in households between the hinterland and the coastland must be reduced if we are to become a more equal nation.

We will continue to work towards the development of an inclusive and integrated plan to close the gap between hinterland and coastland. The plan will involve improved internal communication – aerodromes, bridges, causeways, highways, stelling and telecommunications – and public services such as education, health, human safety and social security.

We will also create stronger regions administered by ‘capital towns’ in order to develop hinterland and rural communities more rapidly. Three new capital towns – at Bartica, Mabaruma and Lethem – have already been created. A fourth will follow at Mahdia. Every region, in the end, will be administered and directed by a ‘capital town.’

Inequality will also be reduced by catalysing greater economic opportunities, particularly at the community level. We will grant greater autonomy to the Regions and ensure equal opportunities for rural folk. The Constitution of Guyana states and I quote: “Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms guaranteed by, or under, this Constitution or any other law.” End of quote.

Guyana, therefore, will promote respect for equality before the law and equal protection of the law. This includes the guaranteed rights of citizens, equality for women and the participation of citizens in the decision-making of the State. In accordance with the Constitution, we will achieve an inclusive system of governance and the holding of regular, free and fair elections.

Education is the gateway to greater opportunities. It is the means to a more equal society. It is a pathway towards improved well-being. It offers an escape from poverty. Guyana must ensure that the right to primary and secondary education at state-owned schools must be accorded to every school-aged child. The State will continue to offer our children the opportunities for a ‘good life’ through education.

Guyana has been a global leader in sustainable development and in the fight against the adverse impacts of climate change. Guyana announced, at the 11th Meeting of Heads of Government of the Commonwealth of Nations held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1989, its commitment to create the institution that eventually became known as the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development.

Our country set aside 371,000 hectares of forest, constituting 1.6 per cent of our landmass “... to develop, demonstrate and make available to our country and the international community systems, methods and techniques for the sustainable management and utilisation of the multiple resources of the tropical forest and the conservation of biological diversity”.

Guyana has advocated for action to be taken against the adverse effects of climate change. This includes consideration for mechanisms to compensate countries with standing forests for the ecological services which these forests provide to humanity. Our Constitution mandates:

In the interests of the present and future generations, the State will protect and make rational use of its lands, mineral and water resources, as well as its fauna and flora, and will take all appropriate measures to ensure and improve the environment.

Independence imposed a moral responsibility to exercise accountable stewardship over our natural resources so that our children and grandchildren may also benefit from their use.

Guyana will develop a multi-faceted 'Green Development Plan' so as to ensure that sustainable development becomes the guiding principle of national development. That Plan, a comprehensive approach to our environment, incorporates clean energy supply; management of our coastal zone; management of solid waste; management of our protected areas; protection of our biodiversity; protection of our wildlife and the development of eco-tourism.

Guyana's future is 'green'. A green economy will protect us from the most adverse effects of climate change. It will ensure a clean environment and reduce pollution. It will preserve our valuable biodiversity. It will ensure that all of our energy needs eventually will be met from sustainable sources. It will catalyse investments in eco-tourism.

Our people's aspirations for a 'good life' cannot be met fully unless employment can be created and guaranteed for our working people. The 'Independence Covenant' cannot be fulfilled unless workers find remunerative and gainful employment in order to provide for their needs and that of their families.

Guyana, over the next 50 years, must be a nation at work, employing the talents and skills of all persons of working age. The provision of employment for our young people remains an economic priority.

Employment will be created through a raft of policy measures including encouraging investment in labour-intensive and 'green' jobs; cottage industries within communities; microcredit for small- and medium-sized industries and promoting entrepreneurship among young people.

Independence was won through the sacrifice and struggle of our ancestors. Freedom was the aspiration of all generations. Every generation has the responsibility to move our country closer towards the common aspirations, which were ignited on 26th May 1966.

Our forebears suffered and sacrificed so that their children could have a better life than they themselves had. This generation's responsibility is to lay the foundation for the 'good life' for the next.

God save our beloved motherland!

God save Guyana!