

# OVERTURE

## CONNECTING THE DOTS OF WHO WE ARE AFTER 50 YEARS



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The opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) presented in this 50th anniversary publication provide an insight into who we are at 50 as we cross the digital divide and seek to embrace a bold new world of possibilities. This is not so much a scholarly production as an informative one, yet its content will provide scholarly material for many researchers who would wish to inquire into the various aspects of life in T&T presented here.

One can never cover all aspects of life in T&T by subject headings, but you will find that the coverage is indeed broad by perusing each article to examine its content and context. From calypso and chutney to constitutions and commerce, the contributors have all presented their own unique insights into T&T over the last 50 years.

However, this is not intended to be an exercise in history, important as that may be; rather it is designed to examine what has happened as part of a navigational aid to gauge where we are headed as a country and as a society.

The building of a nation is not the task of governments alone, but more so the task of its people, whether represented individually through the sheer strength of their personal contributions or channelled through their NGOs, or their wider civil society groupings and associations.

At Independence the Mighty Sparrow talked about a model nation, but the real challenge that faced us then was whether this multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural society could survive as a whole. Many of the fears back then were about the need to superimpose a dominant Western-Christian view of the society in order to retain control and provide stability in a milieu of different racial, religious and cultural practices which had been regarded as inferior in the colonial period.

Those fears have been proven to be unfounded as the formation of an Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) with a rotating chairmanship demonstrates that inclusion does not have to be decreed by

domination of one over another. The tolerance that comes from mutual respect is a priceless commodity in any cosmopolitan society.

In the sphere of politics, the fear of any other organisation besides the People's National Movement (PNM) holding power in our society withered away with the first change of government in 1986 after 24 years of independence. Who would have thought that the names of those who had always been associated with the opposition (as that term came to imply anyone who was against the PNM rather than the more traditional understanding of those who did not have a majority in Parliament) would be entitled to hold office as ministers of government?

The fact that the swearing-in ceremony for that new government (the National Alliance for Reconstruction) in 1986 had to be delayed because there was no copy of the Bhagavad Gita to be found at President's House captured the enormity of the change that had come to Trinidad and Tobago. For the first time, the society was able to remove one layer of fear that had gripped it by virtue, not of the PNM, but rather the concerns of its British colonial authorities that brought a variety of immigrants to Tobago and to Trinidad and created a social order of disadvantage and division in its wake.

Perhaps the PNM were the first beneficiaries through the perpetuation of those fears, but afterwards, the fears manifested themselves in other ways. Our first political change had not even started properly and already there was a documentary on Channel 4 in the UK that spoke of dark clouds hanging over us as a nation in early 1987. Fortunately, we have survived all of that scaremongering and we have gone on to have four more changes of government in which the PNM returned to power in 1991 and 2001, while new political forces, namely the United National Congress (UNC), captured power in 1995 in a coalition and in 2010 in a coalition.

The social uprising of 1970 and the attempted

coup in 1990 were two events that challenged the stability of the State, but we survived. They all comprised arguments for social justice and equality and involved different administrations. The argument about social justice continues even today, as a movement has been formed to advance the cause, yet it seems that in the developing society that we are, the cause will continue to have a place in the national dialogue. How much political support it will garner will be a factor in how it can tap into the psyche of a nation whose unemployment rate has decreased and whose opportunities for further investment suggest a brighter future over the horizon.

The so-called racial divide has manifested itself in voting behaviour patterns, yet the sociological foundations of the society are such that we have moved from cultural domination by an Afro-creole outlook at Independence to a policy of multiculturalism at 50. That transition has taken place far more easily than has been the case in many other developing societies, thereby suggesting that we have no innate desire to fight over an agenda of genuine unity, as opposed to struggling against one of domination.

Our energy and hydrocarbon industries have contributed in no small measure to our development. However, there has been a debate about whether heavy industry or economic diversification into tourism, light manufacturing and services is where our future prosperity lies. These debates will continue while our oil and gas reserves are depleted with the passage of time. All of the tourism articles in this publication have addressed the fact that this area of economic activity has not been adequately developed over the last 50 years.

Perhaps, they are pointing to the fact that there is great potential in our future for the diversified development of a tourism-driven approach that is not based on the stereotypes of what so many believe tourism to be.

The challenge to the heavy industry approach

comes from the articles on greening the economy and sustainable development, which all point to a new way of doing things. That is the wave of the future that can be caught by embracing opportunities for entrepreneurship that are waiting for a new generation – one not necessarily wedded to the idea of state control of the economy, but rather its facilitation of a different kind of development in culture, sports, film, services and agriculture.

The calypso art form and our steelband development will provide the energy for new vistas of social commentary and cultural appreciation that can drive this nation forward.

Some would have us tear up our colonial past and try to build upon the resultant emptiness and others would want to rewrite our history to recast its main characters.

This publication does none of the above. It has afforded a space to such a diversity of writers that Trinidad and its elder sister, Tobago, are all adequately covered. Indeed, the very foundation of our being as a twin-island state still needs to be understood by many so that we can truly appreciate what a gem we are together with the rough edges that still need to be cut. ■

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Flying proudly after 50 years: the National Flag of Trinidad and Tobago



Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge