

Prime Minister's Emancipation 2022 Message

So many milestones and episodes make up the Jamaican story. However, we can agree that the proclamation of Emancipation in 1834, after over 300 years of both Spanish and British enslavement, is pivotal to understanding our current situation and future trajectory. We commemorate Emancipation Day not only as the culmination of the struggles of over 10 generations of our ancestors to gain freedom, but we also recount it as the starting point of a free people now taking up a new struggle to forge themselves into a sovereign nation.

After full freedom in 1838, our former enslaved family members had certain rights granted to them by the colonial government. We did not have a government of our own making, reflection, or choosing. We were subjects of the colonial power but still treated as lesser people in many respects.

For 128 years between Emancipation in 1834 and Independence in 1962, though we lived as free people, it was a monumental struggle to use our freedom to create a better way of life, to forge a new society and eventually a nation. Changing from a slave society and economy to a free society and market economy came under provisions that considered the interest of the proprietors ahead of the welfare of freed people. While planters got compensated for losing their free labour, the former enslaved received no compensation for centuries of forced labour. While there were attempts at providing education, the planter class kept wages low, taxes high, and made land access challenging to support work on the plantations. The post-emancipation struggles of our people led to another pivotal event in our history, the Morant Bay Rebellion which occurred in 1865, 31 years after Emancipation. Paul Bogle

and George William Gordon provided leadership and voice to the frustration and agitation of the masses. Their protest was brutally repressed. Bogle and Gordon were tried under martial law and summarily hanged, over 400 Jamaicans were killed, and hundreds more were imprisoned and lashed. The brutality of the repressive response of the Governor at the time drew the attention of the British Colonial Government, and a Commission of inquiry was held into Jamaica's prevailing social and economic conditions. As a result, the colonial government took a more significant and direct interest in governance and requirements of life for the people of Jamaica. Generally, there was an improvement in civil administration, justice, land settlement, and some social services. To be clear, this was not universal or sufficient, mainly as it related to economic conditions. Nevertheless, this was a significant turning point in the development of Jamaica. As we celebrate our freedom, we honour those who gave their lives, making the ultimate sacrifice, to make our liberty meaningful today.

Despite modest but uneven progress resulting from the Morant Bay Rebellion, by 1938, seventy-three (73) years after the Rebellion, and one hundred (100) years after Full Freedom, the political, social, and economic conditions did not keep pace with the growing population and labour force. The Great Depression of 1933, the onset of World War II, and the weakened and receding British Empire set the global backdrop and context. Locally, our economy remained agrarian and largely undiversified, with sugar and bananas being our main export and leading employers of labour. So, there was not much transformation in our economic circumstances for over 100 years. We also faced a crisis of political participation because the masses could not vote and exercise a true franchise in their affairs.

Therefore, the labour uprisings of 1938 were another pivotal point in our history between Emancipation and Independence. The struggle for better wages was not only the agitations of the working masses against the meanness of the capital and planter class. This energy also gave momentum to political action, with the average Jamaican questioning why the Colonial Government did not intervene on their behalf. They needed a government that represented their interest. Alexander Bustamante and others gave leadership and voice to our labour movement. Together with Norman Manley, they would lay the foundations of the democracy we have today and start the process of claiming our independence and sovereignty.

In the 24 years between the labour struggles of 1938 to Independence in 1962, Jamaica made significant strides in its development as a nation. We established trade unions and labour laws, forged political parties, instituted Universal Adult Suffrage, founded the University of the West Indies, drafted new constitutions, and returned Jamaica to internal self-government. On the economic front, we saw greater diversification with bauxite and tourism and more significant infrastructure development.

So, as we celebrate Emancipation in our 60th year of Independence, we must reflect on what we used our freedom to achieve. Any objective assessment of the 128 years from Emancipation to Independence will conclude that the Jamaicans throughout that period made great strides even though they started with no assets or endowment, particularly in the land. They had no savings or wealth to pass down to generations. Education was primary, and illiteracy was high; violence, a means of control during slavery, became a part of our socialization through generations. The economy simply could not

absorb the labour force and pay meaningful wages. Despite these disadvantages, Jamaica is among the oldest and continuous liberal democracies in the world and is the first black democratic nation. We have a free press and a highly participatory civil society. We have a strong government and civil bureaucracy, are ranked highly on many development indices, and continue to be a respected voice in international affairs and a sought-after brand.

As you listen to this message against a backdrop of current social and economic crises, I want you to situate yourself in the generations of Jamaicans who struggled with the troubles and challenges of their time. Remember how they persevered, kept the faith, and eventually overcame to leave us a legacy on which to build. We must honour their sacrifice by making our own sacrifice for generations to come. Your efforts in educating your children, saving, acquiring property, building your business, abiding by the law, and even the difficult and trying times we are experiencing will mean that the next generation, your children, and grandchildren will be better off. We will progress as a nation when each generation sees themselves as part of the continuum of the struggle for a better Jamaica.

On this Emancipation Day be thankful to your parents and grandparents for their sacrifices and think about how you can leave a greater legacy your children.

God bless you, and God bless Jamaica.