

Jamaica, the Next 60 Years

My fellow Jamaicans, this Independence Day is especially significant; it is our Diamond Jubilee, 60 years as an independent nation. We celebrate under the theme, "Jamaica 60, Reigniting a Nation for Greatness." While we cannot allow the current global crises of a pandemic, war, and inflation to dampen our mood, the government is mindful of the hardships our people are experiencing; therefore, our celebrations must give hope, be meaningful, and uplifting.

At 60, there must be reflection, introspection, contemplation, and prospection. As leaders, have we been good stewards of our nation? As citizens, have we been law-abiding, productive, and creative? And as a nation, have we been doing our part to advance the welfare of the whole human race? What will our story be in another 60 years?

We **reflect** on the unfurling of the black, green, and gold on August 6th, 1962, a glorious time filled with high hopes and great expectations, the culmination of over 450 years of struggle from enslavement to Emancipation to nationhood. As we began to chart our course on the journey as an independent nation, we would meet with many successes and nationally fulfilling moments. Still, we would also encounter real challenges on our journey.

As we **contemplate** our journey, we must come to grips with our pathway. We are a small island open economy, geographically at risk of natural disasters. Our history is one of struggle to secure rights and social justice, particularly for labour and land. Generally, throughout our history, our economy has never been diverse enough to absorb all our labour with meaningful wages, and we have not been resilient enough to recover quickly from shocks. Politically, we have made significant progress in developing the framework to address our social justice issues. There is no question that we have a robust political class that can generate policies and a solid civil bureaucracy to implement them efficiently. The challenge has always been to develop an economy that can support and sustain our social development ambitions while withstanding shocks.

In **retrospect**, it is true that, as Jamaicans, we have not always made the connection between our economic and political choices. For decades we have made political decisions inconsistent with good economic thinking, which have had disastrous social consequences. The perfect example is the build-up of the national debt over several decades. Certainly, external events such as global recessions and natural disasters would have pushed governments to borrow. Notwithstanding, we have created crises of our own, like FINSAC, or allowing inefficiently run state entities to continue without intervention which has driven up the national debt.

The most outstanding achievement of our nation in the last decade would be the political consensus around sustainable fiscal management and debt reduction across administrations. This achievement started in 2010 with the Fiscal Responsibility Framework, enshrined in law with the Fiscal Rules amendments in 2014 to the FAA and PBMA Acts. The Fiscal Rules essentially bind the government, by law, to arrange revenues and expenditures to bring down and maintain the national debt at no more than 60% of GDP.

In 2021, this administration went even further, strengthening our sustainable fiscal management by passing legislation to create an Independent Fiscal Commission, to complement the passage of legislation to create an Independent Central Bank.

This framework will effectively insulate our fiscal management from the vagaries of exploitative and opportunistic political forces who want to spend without regard to the effects of high debt.

I know and understand that many of our citizens, at the moment, may not immediately feel or appreciate the benefit of sustainable fiscal management of the economy and may be prone to support irresponsible run-with-it policies. However, we only need to look back two decades ago to see the impact of *“run wid it policies.”* As we introspect on our past, we can all agree that shortsighted policies may offer short-term relief but end up hurting the poor the most with long-term pain. Let us reject this kind of thinking and not make the same past mistakes. When we look back at this time, decades from now, we will be able to say that Jamaica achieved a significant milestone in

our development and a turning point in our economy. Already we see the effects in the economy's resilience; unemployment is at its lowest level in our history, and investments in infrastructure are increasing.

As we celebrate our 60th year of Independence, I know that many Jamaicans are deeply disturbed by the high levels of violence and disorder in our domestic and public interactions. Security and public safety, law enforcement, and public order are priority concerns for Jamaicans. Our society has changed much faster than the legislative framework necessary to preserve social order. At the time of our independence, we did not contemplate the level of access to weapons and the rampant use of violence and offences against the person. We did not foresee drugs and human trafficking, cybercrimes and scamming, or the pervasiveness of criminal gangs on an enterprise scale. Nevertheless, these problems did not emerge only in the last decade. They have been present and growing significantly in the last 30 years.

This Administration is developing a series of legislation to address the social order issues. The new Road Traffic Regulations will be passed and will come into effect this year. These new regulations will go far in bringing order to our roads. The new scheme for effectively dealing with the proliferation, trade, and use of firearms is now in Parliament and will come into effect this year. This new law will change the risk-reward factor by significantly increasing the penalty for possession

and use of illegal firearms. We will have a slate of new protections for our people, starting with a new Bail Act, an Enhanced Security Measures Act, and a revised Zones of Special Operations Act. We will also review the Offences Against the Persons Act, the Sexual Offences Act and the Domestic Violence Act. All these will create a robust and modern framework relevant to the issues at hand to secure social order.

When we reflect on this period decades from now, we will acknowledge it as the turning point in Jamaica's development towards a more peaceful and less violent society.

The eternal struggle for land and shelter ownership, is a point of contemplation as we consider 60 years of Independence. Your government has committed to creating 70,000 new housing solutions for first-time homeowners. In the last 7 years, we have more than doubled the housing units brought to market. However, we recognize that the actual unfulfilled demand is for housing units at a price point that low-income earners can afford. Several supply-side issues have historically prevented the NHT from effectively addressing this housing market segment. However, I am pleased to report that we have redirected the NHT and the HAJ to focus almost exclusively all their efforts on affordable housing. Though our timelines have been affected by the Pandemic, NHT now has approximately 43,000 housing solutions on its books in various stages, from land acquisition

to construction. When this period of our history is examined, it will be concluded that this was the era when we built the most affordable homes for Jamaicans.

We cannot be prospective about our independence without talking about Education, especially given the high level of learning loss due to the Pandemic. We now have the report of the Education Transformation Commission, and an Oversight Committee has been put in place to monitor the implementation of accepted recommendations. We cannot transform Jamaica without transforming the minds of our people, and the education system is key to this. The education sector is close to my heart, and I will ensure that the resources are in place to support these plans.

Now, we have had major independence anniversary celebrations before, but there were not many legacies to mark as milestones. I have already listed several milestone achievements which will be started this year or completed this year. However, I am particularly pleased with the list of infrastructure projects slated for this our 60th year:

1. We recently broke ground for the Montego Bay Perimeter Road project, taken together with the improvements to Donald Sangster International Airport, this will be a lasting legacy for the North Western parishes of the Island.

2. We have started work on the Morant Bay Urban Centre. Coupled with the South Coast Highway Improvement Project, the Centre will leave a lasting legacy to the people of the North Eastern Parishes.
3. This year we will break ground for the Resilience Park in Portmore as we prepare for Portmore to become our 15th parish.
4. Importantly, we will break ground for our Parliament building this year as an iconic symbol of our sovereignty for generations to come.

And speaking of sovereignty, we have already commenced work towards becoming a Republic.

Hardships there are, but the land is green, and the sun shineth. God has given us the resources to overcome our challenges. We thank the Almighty Father for guarding us with his mighty hands over the last 60 years. We pray for His continued blessing and guidance in our affairs as we look to a future of hope and prosperity.

I look forward to the return of the floats and to again be in the national stadium for the Grand Gala.

Happy Independence, Jamaica.

May God bless you and bless our beautiful Jamaica, the land we love.

