



**The Barbados Yacht Club Lunchtime Presentation**

“Is a Republic a New Future for Barbados?”

by

**Dr. Ronnie R. F. Yearwood**

The Barbados Yacht Club

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*(This is the written text of the speech which may vary slightly from the spoken/reported text.)*

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I would like to thank the Yacht Club and its members for inviting me to speak to you today.

Thank you for that kind introduction.

Often, we talk of enlightening as if some magical process, but it can simply be another term for information sharing, because when we debate, when we discuss, when we critique -- we can find solutions and make things happen -- and that is what democracy is about.

I hope my brief remarks are enlightening.

In considering the topic this afternoon, "Is A Republic a New Future for Barbados?" it is must be an opportunity to reflect on the Constitution, to give all that will be said some context.

There is no better place to start than the preamble of the Constitution.

The preamble of the Barbados Constitution begins with these words: "Whereas the love of free institutions and of independence has always strongly characterised the inhabitants of Barbados"

This is reverence to traditionalism – as Barbadians like to boast of having the third oldest Parliament in the Western Hemisphere. But who was this Parliament for in the 1600s? And who is this Parliament for today?

The Preamble goes on to state that: “And Whereas with the broadening down of freedom [to] the people of Barbados ...”

The fact is that Barbados was not formed out of any love of liberty or gifting of freedoms, it was formed from generations of violence and inequality perpetuated by its legal, political and socio-economic system.

The undeniable fact is that in our Constitution, there is silence about the terror and violence that lay at the heart of the formation of our society.

We must remind ourselves that our current disparities, social and economic, have origins in this terror, that was overlaid by an independent Barbados. The fact is that issues of race, class and colourism continue to pervade our country.

I believe that we cannot solve the problems that Barbados faces, and these challenges are many; fiscal, economic, social, crime, and governance, unless we solve them together.

This does not mean that we do not understand our different stories and starting points – I can no more deny my ancestry than anyone else can -- but what it does mean is that Barbados is our country and we all want a better future for our children and their children.

If the preamble to the Constitution is anything to go by, the Constitution and our country – Barbados -- remain unfinished works.

Works in progress as we attempt to resolve our origin and perfect our future nationhood.

This is why today's discussion on possibly moving towards a Republic and what should actually be substantive political and constitutional changes is important, because we speak to the future of Barbados and what that could look like, at least one key aspect, our political-constitutional set up.

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Our Independence Constitutions in the Caribbean, with probably, the exception of Trinidad, were drafted without much public input and discussion.

This seems to be a recurring theme, if we take the proposed change to a Republic and whatever the government means by a Republic – because Republics come in various forms, from Guyana to America.

The proposed change to a Republic was not discussed by the Government during the last election and it appears will not be put to a referendum. If this is not a matter for a referendum, what is?

In fact, the historical process for self-government in Barbados and the Caribbean could be seen as conservative. For example, Alexander Bustamante (of Jamaica) in 1947 said: “I want to become Governor of my colony!”

The point is that most Caribbean colonial leaders wanted absolute power. And what has changed today?

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It is against this backdrop of the nature and formation of our Constitution then that I want to briefly discuss three things before the floor is open for discussion, because I want this session to be interactive.

I will briefly examine; one, the formation and remit, the terms of reference of the recent Government formed Republican Status Transition Advisory Committee.

Two, what is a Republic, at least one characterization.

Three, make a few suggestions for meaningful constitutional reform.

I am not here to give a final recommendation. I am here to propose to the importance of meaningful reform and give some suggestions.

I do not want to get too theoretical and technical - it is a Friday afternoon after all but I will try to unpack some of these issues.

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Let us start with the Republican Status Transition Advisory Committee. It is important for us to unpack its remit because this is the starting point on which the Government will attempt Constitutional reform in moving Barbados to Republic.

I said in one of my recent columns that it looks like the names of the persons on the Committee could have been randomly chosen from the electoral register and perhaps we could add, a lucky dip.

Politics, and I mean party politics, often seems to get in the way of meritocracy, common sense and essentially what is good for Barbados and not simply those momentarily in charge.

My point which I stand by was the Committee appears woefully unprepared for the task at hand.

This is not to question the competence of the persons on the Committee in their own spheres and fields. But let us quickly examine what the Committee is tasked to do.

The main role according to the terms of the Committee is to “recommend the constitutional requirements necessary to effect the change [to a Republic] and to recommend the type of Presidency, the powers and tenure of the President, and to determine the ceremonial and legal implications of the Presidential status.”

We learn a few things here about the Government’s thinking.

The Committee does not appear to be engaging in changing the Constitution so much as amending the Constitution.

Changing and amending are two different things (as some scholars argue).

Amending keeps intact the constitution and the systems of government.

Whereas changing is requiring an entirely different form and type of Constitution, for example examining the role of government, structure of government, powers of the Prime Minister, type of electoral system – some of the matters that will form suggestions and point to a way forward.

Therefore, no matter how grandiose the Government tries to make the Transition Advisory Committee sound, big change does not appear to be part of the terms of reference of the Committee and if they are, then they are hidden from us, the people, which is exceedingly worrying.

Further, the Chair of the Committee confirmed a decision has already made about Barbados being a Republic and I can only assume its form from the terms of reference which mention a ‘ceremonial Presidency.’

Therefore, I am not sure why any right-thinking Bajan would bother to make a submission – a submission to what, and for what purpose if the decision appears already made.



The Chair of the Committee said and I quote: “We are not making a decision. The decision has been made already. Over the years several Prime Ministers have confirmed that this is what they want, but somehow, we never actually made the last step. And the last step is the one that actually brings the constitution home to Barbados so that our Parliament in Barbados would now be responsible for the Constitution by which we are run.”

Repatriating or patriating the Constitution from the UK does not affect us being responsible for the Constitution. We have been responsible for the Constitution since 1966 and in fact some scholars would argue that Barbados has been a republic since then.

The Committee does not strike me as a wide-ranging constitutional reform committee, but more to make a few amendments regarding symbolic points such patriating the Constitution from an act of the UK Parliament to one of our parliament, and replacing one ceremonial Head of State with another ceremonial Head of State.

The discussion about being a Republic is often framed as for an against, with no context or discussion of the wider political changes or constitutional changes that Barbados requires. The Advisory Committee unfortunately seems to reflect this.

It means that the conversation around the Republic often is limited about whether we will have an executive or ceremonial Presidency, and so the conversation is stunted right from the beginning. Our first task must be to open the conversation and deepen the conversation.

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If we understand that a Republic simply means limited government, within the context of rule of law, then essentially, the people are the true power and government functions within the law, and that no one is above the law.

Therefore, the real issue I think we face is not about whether Barbados becomes a Republic or not, or that Barbados patriates its Constitution or not, especially if we operate on the premise that we already control our Constitution and there is nothing that can invalidate that premise.

Indeed, some scholars argue is that we subjected ourselves to the British Monarch because at no point in the Barbados Constitution have, we ever constituted a monarchy as a central institution. It is also “impossible” for us to appropriate the British Monarch, even if we have language in the Constitution whereby, we swear allegiance to the Queen. Prof McIntosh therefore calls the idea that we a constitutional monarchy a Noble lie.

Therefore, the real issue becomes one about the relationship between us, as **The People and Our Government**.

The conversation is about what meaningful political and constitutional changes do we want to our governance system?

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Let us consider that the Government will continue with its intended plan, it appears of swapping one ceremonial head for another, the Governor General for a President.

Then I think that any new President of a Republic, ceremonial or executive should be directly elected and all Barbadians afforded the opportunity to run for and vote for this office.

The Prime Minister likes to talk about every Barbadian boy or girl aspiring to the high office and knowing it is not representative of the Queen.

Let us make that aspiration real and not just talk.

Let us have the new President or whatever it is called directly elected that those boys and girls can aspire to, and not a President formed in the backrooms of the Parliament functioning as an electoral college for choosing a President, likely one of the same political class.

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Now, let us look at what I called the Relationship between people and government.

Should we limit the size of a Cabinet? Should people outside of Parliament be Ministers, that is, part of the Executive? Do we have too many constituencies? These are serious and complex issues and I will try to frame the discussion around them and others.

Conversations about political change often get into a laundry list of suggestions without framing, without anchoring ideas. Put simply, without vision, a point I return to at the end.

It is like trying to furnish a house, which we have not built. We are selecting paint for walls that do not exist, fixtures for a roof that is not there and furniture for rooms that we do not know the size or shape.

Often arguments are advocated about the size of the government without a credible debate about the purpose of government. I think we have to set out the concepts, the specifics can follow.

I think that any new form of governance system should emphasize the role of government as a facilitator of wealth creation and enterprise development.

Government becomes an agent for economic democracy, or enfranchisement. A tax and spend policy as the basis for the economic and political reform of Barbados will prove insufficient to meet the demands for the provision of social services, education, healthcare and in particular the social care of an aging population.

The current precarious state of the global and national economy means that an increased tax burden is probably not a feasible option if we want to encourage enterprises and to grow our economy. The idea is that government provides the basic oversight, physical infrastructure, tax and legislative framework, which can allow entrepreneurs, inventors and investors to take root.

The point I make here is a simple one, a democracy will fail without the economic foundation for people to make and own property -- and by that I mean land,

money and elements of wealth in the broadest sense -- and to have a government, whose role is to encourage and protect that ability.

The economic market cannot function if there is no democracy that allows for the rule of law and proper systems of governance.

So, if we have an idea of the role and purpose, we want government to play in our lives, then it should follow that the government's size and form should set into place, answering questions about whether we limit the size of a Cabinet? Should people outside of Parliament be Ministers, that is, part of the Executive? Do we have too many constituencies? Should we merge the role of Prime Minister and Governor General, while reducing the overall powers of the office.

Otherwise, these discussions are being had in the abstract and become somewhat meaningless and frustrating. Remember what I said about broaden the discussion on being a Republic.

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Say we agree with government being focused on core areas as I suggested above. Then, take our present system, a person can win a popularity contest but does that

make them prepared or provide them with the ability to lead an executive arm of government.

Some persons have failed upwards -- should they be vested with the ability to spend millions of taxpayers' dollars, while the talent the country often needs, shy away from public and political life for fear of being pastured out to the professional and personal wilderness. Anyone, with real talent, who offers themselves for public life are considered either detached from this reality or actually that they love Barbados, or maybe both, because otherwise why try.

Perhaps the time has come have more separation between Parliament and the executive. A mix of ministers from the Parliament and outside the Parliament.

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This leads into another big consideration. Is it time to get rid of the Senate if we have more separation between the Executive and Parliament? What role does the Senate play, when by our Constitution it is stacked in favour of whichever political party is the Government of the day, having 12 government, 2 opposition and 7 independents senators.

The Senate, is therefore an unelected chamber that will not go against the Government in most if not all instances.

I know arguments are made for special group interests represented by Senators, but why, they have not greater need, right or place for representation than any other person or other groups in our country. So, in its current construction, the Senate is undemocratic and provides power to special groups.

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There are so many issues to examine but I want to touch on rights as I approach the end.

The Chair of the Republic Advisory Committee stated that, “[They] are trying to see this as an opportunity by young people... to use the Constitution with certain revision particularly the areas on rights and responsibilities and aspirations and so on, to articulate that in the constitution, so they can ally themselves with it.”

My reply to such a statement, is that we should also bear in mind that we do not have to put everything and the kitchen sink in the constitution. The constitutions of the Caribbean as some scholars argue are already inelegant documents, clunky documents.



However, when you look at the terms of reference, there is no direct reference to amending the bill of rights in the Barbados Constitution. The terms of reference state that the Committee should also “Reflect” the rights, obligations, ambitions and expectations of the people of Barbados. No mention of amending or re-writing or producing a new Bill of Rights, which some would argue is antiquated and in need of a serious change. But amending the Bill of Rights is serious and cannot be a by the way thing.

What rights will be added? Are we going the way of Jamaica, with a very expansive Charter of Rights and Freedoms where for example there is a clear right to privacy which the Barbados constitution does not contain?

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If the Government is trying to dress up what is a role swap from the Queen to another ceremonial head state, or to sneak in critical discussions in the terms of reference, then that is not only disingenuous to the people of Barbados, it smacks of disrespect to the Constitution and to The People.

Though I am not sure why we are surprised, the Government in its first amendment to the Constitution as Government, amended the Constitution to make two Senators, purported colleagues of the Prime Minister, Senators when

they failed to meet the tests of residency in Barbados -- And further with all the seats but one, and full control of the lower and upper house, the Government still cannot pass anti-corruption laws.

It is all a matter of priorities and vision.

This could be a real moment for real change of the Constitution and our governance systems, not amending the Constitution and so tinker at the margins, but we have to seize it, and we have to demand it.

If you want to start a petition, that there be a referendum and that the Government sets out clearly in some form of document what it intends for the Republic of Barbados, then demand it, action and agitate for it. We fight the battles we want, not expecting others to do so for us.

I think the Government should be sent back to the drawing board on the republic transition committee and told to come again.

If the Government wants to change the Constitution, then say so and do so, and take use, the People in your confidence.

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I want to end on a personal note, because often these sorts of discussions and changes -- Republics, Constitutions, politics, new this or that, can seem so removed from who we are, where we are and where we want to be.

Why a subject like this? I reflected in preparation for this talk that a decade ago, I made calls for Constitutional reform and stated that a lack of vision was crippling Barbados.

I still feel this way today.

I stated at that time that the modern political leadership of Barbados has lacked will, direction, and vision. Solid vision and leadership were necessary to define with all Barbadians, the type of country we wanted.

We need to ask what type of Barbados do we want, what type of government and constitution do we want, what type of person should our educational system produce, what should our public sector look like, how should we finance pensions, what level and involvement do we want from Government, how do we protect the vulnerable in providing basic services.

I concluded a decade ago as I do now, "It comes down to a question of vision and if we fail to answer what appears as that simple question, we can have as many

ideas as we want, but we will go nowhere fast or slow, because we will not know where to go. It is a matter of vision.”

I became a father recently for the first time and having a baby changes everything from sleeping patterns to worldviews -- and the things I think about now and the things I want to achieve -- the Barbados I want to create.

My son will not be able to disown his black ancestry. He will not be able to disown his white ancestry. My wife and I have passed on our tapestry to him. This is part of the story that is Barbados.

I want a Barbados so that when my son walks into a room, or on the cricket pitch or football field, playground, or onto the floor of Frank Collymore Hall like I did many years ago in youth parliament, people do not look at the colour of his skin, how curly his hair is or try to determine how he should talk, or who he belongs to, but that he is a Bajan.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I know you all want the same thing for your children and grandchildren, so let us create that country together.

Let us really create a New Republic.

Thank you.