



Australian High Commission

Trinidad and Tobago

Speech by HE John Pilbeam, Australian High Commissioner in celebration of the 45th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Australia and Trinidad and Tobago in Moka, Trinidad on 18 July 2019

The Hon Ivor Archie, Chief Justice;
Dr the Hon Keith Rowley, Prime Minister and Mrs Rowley;
The Hon Faris Al Rawi, Attorney-General;
Sen the Hon Dennis Moses Minister for Foreign & CARICOM Affairs;
Senator Hazel Thompson-Ahye;
His Worship the Mayor of Port of Spain, Joel Martinez;
Col Darnley Wyke, Acting Chief of Defence Staff and
Senior Members of the Protective Services;
Senior Government Officials;
Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you all for making your difficult way up Saddle Road to honour, with your presence, Australia's very special links with Trinidad and Tobago. The people of "sweet T and T" are world-renowned for their ability to party and we want to make this a party to remember.

So tonight, we've got:

- good food from Bernard Long – like the Black Caps, ever reliable, including Yvonne's own take on our largest export to this country - Australian goat - from Premium Quality Meats,
- Yellowtail wines from Hadco and enough bubbly Australian wine from my personal stocks to ensure that everyone can join in the toasts,
- Not one, not two, but three Australian wine lucky door prizes,
- the dulcet tones of the Renegades, thanks to BP, and of course
- yourselves, the Aussie-posse, the best company in town.

Forty-five years ago, in 1974, Australia established formal diplomatic relations with Trinidad and Tobago through our High Commission in Ottawa. But our official ties stretch back much further than that - an Australian Trade Commissioner was located downtown, on South Quay, in 1951, before even I was born.

In 1976, back in Eric Williams' time, I was one of the first Australian diplomats to receive a Caribbean assignment – the High Commission was then located in Kingston, Jamaica.

I remember my High Commissioner telling me Trinidad and Tobago would be one of my responsibilities.

I'd fly in from Palisadoes on BWIA, take a room at the Hilton and tote my briefcase across the Savannah to the Foreign Ministry at Knowsley, buying myself a coconut to drink on the way back. There's a bit more traffic when I visit the Foreign Ministry these days..

Since then, an Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, visited Port of Spain in 2009 for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, though I suspect that inducting Brian Lara into the Order of Australia was a task that was every bit as important.

And, of course, in May 2018, Prime Minister Rowley travelled far and wide in Australia looking for quality fast-ferries and patrol boats, on good terms. I think he found what he was looking for.

In trade, Australia is, after the US, the world's largest market for Angostura bitters – this is probably due to the development, and some would say the invention, of that lemon, lime and bitters mixed drink in Australia - and we buy quite a lot of rum from Angostura too.

In investment, Australia's BHP produces around ten percent of Trinidad and Tobago's oil and gas. BHP is currently developing an oil and gas field and has an active deep-water drilling program which should lift its future local production-share. And Australian consulting engineers WorleyParsons, now branded Worley, help ensure that those complex processes in the LNG industry actually work.

Australia also shares its experience and expertise in areas where we face common problems, providing Trinidad and Tobago with its perspectives on issues as diverse as road safety, coral reefs, cocoa cultivation, international events, and countering violent extremism.

We've also worked with community groups on anti-litter and recycling programs, on providing shelter for those affected by gender-based violence, and on celebrating the legacy of the Caribbean's greatest poet, Derek Walcott.

We make cultural offerings. In the last few years, some of you will have seen performances by our Indigenous dance group Descendance and screenings of *The Last Goldfish*, the work of a Trinidad-born Australian film-maker. And next month, on 9 August, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples - we'll open an Australian Indigenous art exhibition at Medulla Gallery - "Indigenous Reflections – From our islands to yours".

These are Australia's visible links with Trinidad and Tobago, but our relationship is much bigger and warmer than that. As nations, we're 16,000 kilometres apart, but culturally, we could be living next door. Part of that bigger, warmer relationship is a common language, part of it our diversity of cultures - half of our people were born somewhere else or had a parent who was – part of it is our common appreciation of our Indigenous heritage.

Another part is our inclination towards freedom. But most of it comes down to our shared love of sport – cricket especially, but netball and football too.

In the light of recent events, I'm loath to talk too much about cricket. But CLR James, the sage of Tunapuna, is famed for his observation "what do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?" I would turn that on its head – it's pretty hard to learn much about cricket without learning about its context. For instance, unlike almost everyone else in the world, many people in Trinidad and Tobago can name and even pronounce correctly the state capitals of Australia because they're all attached to famous cricket grounds.

In the early days, it was cricket that mostly brought us together. There's a photo at our office taken at Queen's Park in April 1955 of the first Australian touring team to "the West Indies and British Guiana". Almost at the end of a row is a youngish, nervous-looking, Richie Benaud, who was of course Australia's captain during the famous Brisbane tied test of 1960. When that magnificent test series ended, 20,000 Australians turned out to farewell the West Indies players as they travelled in open cars through Melbourne. Growing up a few years later in country Victoria, whoever I spoke to seemed to have been there, or knew someone who was. So yes, I think a tie is a legitimate result for a cricket match.

Test cricket links are fading a bit in the IPL age, but cricket tours go on. The Australian Women's cricket team – the current world champions - are to be in the Caribbean in August and September and the men are next expected in 2021. And I'm looking forward to carrying a Windies flag to the Men's T20 World Cup in Australia in October-November 2020.

Cricket's helped Australia and the countries of the Caribbean to learn to respect each other, and we still do.

In netball, Toco's own Sam Wallace is the best Goal Shooter playing in Australia's professional netball league, for the NSW Swifts. She's currently putting in an outstanding performance for Trinidad and Tobago at the Netball World Cup in Liverpool. She's also famous for observing that, while Australians dance with their hands, Trinidadians dance with their waists.

Dwight Yorke helped bring professional football to Australia by playing as Sydney FC's marquee player from 2005 to 2006. He never told us how Tobagonians danced.

The Commonwealth, of which we are both members, is an organisation we agree can achieve a lot - it usefully encouraged peaceful change in Southern Africa and it does good work observing elections, countering violent extremism, and helping countries apply for climate change finance. Australia is the Commonwealth's second-largest funding source and our respective leaders are among the many who enjoy the instant intimacy of its high-level meetings.

But I have to confess the thing Australians like most about the Commonwealth is the Commonwealth Games – the Friendly Games where young athletes first become stars, where there's gender equality in the allocation of medals, and where Special Olympians are fully-fledged members of national teams.

Australia was delighted to welcome Trinidad and Tobago's athletes and spectators to the Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast last year. Magnificent performances there by Jereem Richards, Michelle-Lee Ahye and Dylan Carter inspired us all. Now we have the Commonwealth Youth Games to look forward to, as Trinidad and Tobago welcomes visitors from around the Commonwealth, including of course Australia, in 2021.

We've fought wars together and only history knows what undocumented friendships grew out of those shared hardships. In World War One, we fought together in Palestine and on the Western Front.

In the early years of World War Two, Australians flew out of bases here to train US flyers and help protect Caribbean harbours and shipping from submarine attack. Three are buried in the St James Military Cemetery and we commemorate their sacrifice annually.

A successful Trinidad wartime entertainer, Tunapuna-born boogie-woogie pianist Winifred Atwell, immigrated to Australia in the 1970s and, at a concert for construction workers, became the first person to play the piano at what would become the Sydney Opera House.

And then there's Ralph de Bossiere, the Trinidadian writer and colleague of CLR James who put the heart back into socialist realism and spent his last sixty years in Australia.

The more links you look for between Trinidad and Tobago and Australia, the more you find. They turn up in surprising places. And they're all intriguing, positive stories of spontaneous friendship and easy understanding.

Who knows what stories there are among the 2,500 Australians who told our census collectors they were born here or were of Trinidad and Tobago descent? Or what stories are yet to come?

Yvonne and I will soon be leaving Port of Spain for Australia. Though it's a long journey, we'll be back - we are leaving so many friendships here. The best of Trinidad and Tobago will stay with us - its beauty, its surprises, and its irrepressible spirit - the conviction that life is to be lived, and lived with flair!

The Caribbean has become my fascination and my second home. I have Yvonne, and many of you, to thank for that.

In closing, dear friends, I'd like to thank you all for listening so politely for so long. But mostly, I want to thank our event coordinator, Casey, our emcee Jendayi, our logistics magicians Lisa, Gina and Lorraine, our floral artiste Yvonne and all those at the High Commission who have worked tirelessly to make your attendance at our forty-fifth anniversary party an enjoyable compensation for your struggle back along Saddle Road tonight. Thank you all.