



The Importance of Humanism

Opening Address by Kevin Baldeosingh

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There are more and more people who feel that Trinidad and Tobago is now a collapsing state. This is different from saying that crime is on the rise, or that our literacy rates are falling, or that our health care system is failing, or that our legal system is biased, or that the media are unprofessional. All these things are symptomatic of a collapsing state. They are signs that the institutions and systems and organisations which we use to supply our needs - for food, shelter, physical security, cultural activities, intellectual life, even personal relationships - all these are failing and, if we don't stop that failure, then there will come a point where all will be anarchy, when we will be living in a country where only a minority of privileged persons can live comfortably, and nobody can live securely. That is what happens when a state fails.

We have reached a stage where the problems of our society seem overwhelming, where those of us who are concerned about our country may think that all these problems are too big to tackle, that we are powerless, and that the persons in power are incompetent or uncaring or both. So what do we do? It is true that the problems this country faces are too many and too large for any one person or even any one organisation to tackle. But it is not true that anyone is entirely powerless. What every concerned person has to do is to choose a particular problem, a particular issue, which interests them and which their talent or skills or knowledge or position equips them to fight.

Of course, a large part of the reason that we have so many problems is that we don't have enough concerned people in our society - or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we have too many people who are only concerned about themselves. But if that can change, if we can get enough people who will tackle our various problems in a rational and committed fashion, we may well be able to reverse the collapse that we see happening around us. This is why the Humanist philosophy is so important today. Our members are all persons who want to see Trinidad and Tobago attain its undoubted potential. Interestingly, while most of our members are Trinbagonian, we also have persons from other countries, from the United States to Norway to India to the Netherlands, who have lived and worked here for many years and who share the same concerns. Our main goal is to promote rationality and ethical standards in public life. You may ask why we did not choose something more specific or more concrete, like saving the wetlands or promoting prison reform or abolishing the death penalty.

The reason is this. First, there are very few individuals, and no organisation, which promotes reasoned and ethical thinking in this country. Secondly, when you look at the wealth Trinidad and Tobago has, and the many talented and intelligent individuals who live here, it is a puzzle why we aren't doing better as a nation. And it seems fair to say that where we are falling short



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is in our attitudes as a people. This is the part our Association feels we can play in national life. We hope, by educating people about the humanism and its tenets, by demonstrating how it is the humanist philosophy which has helped create the modern world, and by showing how that approach can help create more effective and practical public policies, we can bring about a change of attitude in our society, and that that change will help us deal more effectively with specific issues.

So we want people, particularly people in positions of power, to act on evidence and reason. That might seem simple, but in this society it is the hardest thing to do. Most people prefer to act on the basis of superstition and folk wisdom and short-term approaches. And far too many people are concerned only about their racial or ethnic or religious or class groupings, and far too few, no matter what their rhetoric to the contrary, are concerned about the entire society. Well, we are humanists. We are concerned about everyone. And we believe that a rational approach, an ethical approach, a compassionate approach, will help everyone. This is what we are here to promote.

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