

“Our progressive economy is consistently bolstered by our international reputation as a peaceful and stable democratic nation”

INTERVIEW

The Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar, SC, MP, Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago



Trinidad and Tobago’s prime minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, talks to *Global* about her plans for strengthening and diversifying the economy away from its dependency on oil and gas reserves. She has high hopes of enhancing competitiveness through legislative and institutional reforms, and strongly believes that expanding trade relations with Latin America and the new emerging economies is the way forward. Persad-Bissessar also touches on the rise of women’s participation in parliament, and reveals planned measures to tackle the big challenge in the country’s education system – that of boys’ underachievement.

Global: For 2013, the World Bank has ranked Trinidad and Tobago at 69 of 185 countries for doing business. This is one step up from 2012, but still an uncompetitive ranking for a country seeking to attract new foreign investment and encourage local investors. What concrete steps are your government taking to improve the conditions for doing business?

Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar: Improving the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago is a priority for the government of Trinidad and Tobago. In this regard, a series of reforms are being aggressively pursued. [For example,] implementation of a Single Electronic Window for Trade and Business Facilitation. This IT platform, which became operational in February 2012, links over ten government departments in delivering key business-related e-services (such as e-fiscal incentives, e-import/export licences and permits, e-company registration, e-work permits and e-certificates of origin for exporters) in real time to the business community.

[In addition,] several pieces of legislation – such as the Companies Act, Fiscal Incentives Act, Value Added Tax etc – are being amended so as to remove burdensome procedures and regulations which adversely affect the business community. In January 2012, the Electronic Transactions Act was proclaimed into law, which now allows the state to transact business in the electronic realm.

Earlier this year [2012], there were over 13 state agencies across various ministries in Trinidad and Tobago in which potential investors had to interact with. The cabinet in August 2012 streamlined the portfolios of each of these agencies, and assigned InvesTT – a subsidiary of Evolving Technologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited (eTecK) – as the official Investment Promotion Agency. This will allow for a smoother and better coordinated investment facilitation process in Trinidad and Tobago.

[We are also] strengthening entrepreneurship. Under the Ministry of Labour [and] Small and Micro Enterprise Development, the National Integrated Business Incubator programme focuses on pre-incubator training and incubator services and financing in community-based centres.

With which countries or regions does your government see its future trade and economic relationships, and why?

Trinidad and Tobago continues to value its existing trade and economic relationships. However, it is absolutely essential that it deepens its existing relationships and expands with other countries as we promote the growth and diversification of our economy. In the area of trade, Trinidad and Tobago envisages consolidation of relationships with its traditional trading partners, such as the United States, Canada, Europe and our neighbours within the Caricom region.

The USA is our main trading partner. In 2011, total trade with the USA was approximately US\$7 billion. It is also the highest source of inward investment for energy and non-energy products and services sectors (66 percent in 2010). Europe is our second largest partner through the CARIFORUM-EC Economic Partnership Agreement.

Caricom is our third largest trading partner, and that market is critical as the region seeks to deepen the integration process. Canada is our sixth major export market for energy and non-energy products, especially for the large diaspora community in Toronto and Ottawa.

My administration has stated its inten-



Key data

- **Population:** 1,341,000 (2010)
- **Ethnic groups:** Indian (40%), African (37.5%) and others
- **Literacy:** 98.8%
- **Life expectancy:** 70 years
- **Capital:** Port of Spain (pop: 57,000)
- **Land area:** 5,128 km²
- **GDP:** US\$26.49 billion (2011 est.)
- **GNI per capita:** US\$15,380 (2010 est.)
- **Main exports:** petroleum and petroleum products, liquefied natural gas, methanol, ammonia, steel products, beverages, cereal, sugar, cocoa

tion to expand and strengthen trade relations with Latin American countries, given the geographic proximity and increasing purchasing power of its citizenry. We have commenced initiatives with such countries as Panama, Guatemala and El Salvador. We consider these to be important markets, especially for the exports of goods and services from the non-energy sector.

Our traditional sector, energy, requires us to engage other economies whose economic activities are aligned to this industry. Here we envisage trade and economic relations with a number of African and Asian countries.

Economic diversification is not a quick-fix solution, it has to be sustained in the medium and long term. It requires political will and fortitude to water and nurture the seeds of diversification, through the economic ups and downs, to take deep roots and bear fruit

We are assiduously working towards making Trinidad and Tobago the gateway to the Americas, as it is ideally positioned geographically. We have also significantly integrated Spanish into our society, in order to facilitate more robust trade with our South American partners.

Our progressive economy is consistently bolstered by our international reputation as

a peaceful and stable democratic nation.

Additionally, considering the changing patterns in world trade and investment flows, such countries as Brazil, China, South Africa and India also emerge as candidates for future engagement. We are therefore actively seeking to enhance our relationships with these countries.

Economic diversification from oil and natural gas is proving to be a difficult goal to achieve by successive governments in Trinidad and Tobago, including yours. What are the special difficulties being faced by your government in this regard?

Economic diversification for countries blessed with an endowment of natural resources has been a challenge for many governments worldwide, including Trinidad and Tobago.

The special difficulties faced by my administration are not new but are issues that have posed challenges to previous administrations as well. The special difficulties are: vulnerability of Trinidad and Tobago to international economic environment; risk aversions of local businessmen; very limited value added to products and lack of capacity and ability to adapt technology and to innovate; outdated legal/regulatory and institutional/administrative frameworks for private sector activities; productivity levels; [and] very limited foreign investment in the non-energy sector.

However, my administration remains committed to broadening the role played by the non-energy sector of the economy. Indeed, in 2012, the growth in the non-petroleum industry (estimated at approximately 1.9 percent) is expected to outperform the petroleum industry and will also be the first time since 2009 that this sector of the economy has achieved positive growth.

Under the auspices of the Ministry of ►



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SHIPBUILDING & REPAIR
DEVELOPMENT COMPANY

Trinidad & Tobago Shipbuilding & Repair Cluster

Diversifying our economy, one ship at a time ...

'The Government in its last two budget statements has committed to an industry of ship building and repair as both a parallel and alternative industry to the oil and gas industry. Trade and Industry Minister Vasant Bharath is positive about the Government's plans to begin a local shipbuilding and repair industry by year's end and confirmed that the shipping industry is one earmarked by Government for aggressive expansion in its diversification thrust.'

Trinidad and Tobago has become known for its well-established, energy-based economy, and the country derives most of its revenue from the energy sector. However, the government recognises that energy resources are finite and in order to achieve long-term, sustainable growth and development, the country must aggressively diversify its economy.

The objective of the development strategy of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is to generate economic growth through diversification and the development of business in non-energy sectors. The Trinidad & Tobago Shipbuilding & Repair Cluster is a key element of this drive for diversification. It has the task of identifying lines of action, aiming to enhance the industry's vibrancy, dynamism and world-wide competitiveness and with it securing sustainable growth, with the intention of also helping the country further diversify the local economy from the energy sector.



'Shipbuilding and repair is of strategic importance in many respects. It develops advanced technologies that offer considerable spin-offs to other sectors; it provides essential means of transport for regional and international trade; and it supplies maritime companies and Governments with advanced vessels.'



Wilfred de Gannes (2nd right) with his students after their successful presentation on 'Superhydrophobic Coatings & Nano-technology' at the Lok Jack GSB Open Day



Senator the Hon. Emmanuel George, Minister of Works and Infrastructure welcomed to SRDC's stall at the Trade and Investment Convention by Chairman and CEO Wilfred de Gannes

It shall be our policy to promote sound safety, health and environmental practices. Safety, health, and environmental performance are core values of the organisation. These values will benefit the industry, employees and the community.



(From right to left): Wilfred de Gannes presents a cheque to Mrs. Linda Kelshall of the Chaguaramas Military, History and Aviation Museum, with Mr Michael Burke, SRDC Director

Vision

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Mission

We are local shipbuilding and repair entrepreneurs dedicated to the growth and development of the industry, by providing the highest quality of professional, technical and logistical solutions to our customers; and by promoting and sustaining globally recognised human resource competencies, technology and physical infrastructure, while achieving operational profitably and surpassing established global standards.

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- *Keeping pace with current worldwide maritime expansion*
- *Integration with local manufacturing, e.g. ESSAR STEEL and ALUTRINT*
- *Linkages with local Training and R&D Institutes, e.g. UTT, UWI and Caribbean Fisheries Training and Development Institute*
- *Achieving our Vision 2020 goals*

'T&T has the benefit of being geographically well-placed. When we compare ourselves to Singapore, for example, which is a world leader in ship repair and ship conversion, they have some 87 licensed shipyards, but they are a little off the beaten track of the shipping lanes where the ships move their cargo. T&T is fortunate we have ships numbering 31,000 voyages within 25 nautical miles per annum. That describes the market. We are looking to get a small piece of it.'



Wilfred de Gannes, Chairman and CEO

► Planning and Sustainable Development, the government has identified six business clusters – Energy, Food Sustainability, Maritime, Tourism, Creative Industries and Financial Services – to drive its diversification targets. The government is also actively pursuing the operationalisation of a National Innovation System of Trinidad and Tobago (NISTT) and National Innovation Policy, which we anticipate will act as a catalyst for increased innovation to be the driving force behind our economic sustainability.

Economic diversification is not a quick fix solution but has to be sustained in the medium and long term. It would require political will and fortitude to water and nurture the seeds of diversification, through the economic ups and downs, to take deep roots and bear fruits many years from now.

My administration has the diversification of the economy as a top priority and is committed to the long-term process.

Caricom continues to fail to meet projected objectives in relation to the establishment and operation of the Single Market Economy. Several deadlines have been missed. Has the economic and trade grouping run its course?

I do not believe so. Economic integration for countries all over the world has always been a challenge. Caricom is the second major market for Trinidad and Tobago [and] provides an avenue for sharpening our domestic competitiveness since we are the leading exporter in Caricom, generating in excess of 80 percent of intra-Caricom merchandise exports. Therefore, Trinidad and Tobago's further integration with the Caricom region must, by necessity, remain a priority.

Trinidad and Tobago, as a member of Caricom, is fully committed to the realisation of a Caricom Single Market and Economy (CSME) since the main objectives of the CSME are: full use of labour (full employment); full exploitation of the other factors of production (natural resources and capital); and competitive production leading to greater variety and quantity of products and services to trade with other countries extra-regionally.

It is therefore expected that these objectives will in turn provide improved standards of living and sustained economic development throughout the region.

You were Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth up to October 2012 and you are now part of its leadership, 'Troika'. What is your vision of the Commonwealth's role in the future, and how is your government pursuing that vision?



Kamla Persad-Bissessar speaking at the 2011 World Economic Forum on Latin America in Rio de Janeiro

The vision for the Commonwealth has always been multifaceted, as it has evolved over the years to cater to the political, social and economic development of its member states. In doing so, the vision for the Commonwealth is that of a network of collaborative organisations and partnerships, which can be a force for the greater good of its membership and for the world.

In Trinidad and Tobago, one of the main challenges of the education system is not the exclusion or marginalisation of young girls, but that our young women are significantly outperforming their male counterparts

One area envisioned for further development is the strengthening of the Commonwealth's role in education, in particular, the issue of the education of young girls. This is particularly important to me, as in many parts of the world there is systemic discrimination, which denies them access to education, therefore shackling them and relegating them to a life of marginalisation and poverty.

In Trinidad and Tobago, education remains one of the largest expenditure items in the annual budget. We maintain free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 16. My government's eConnect and Learn (eCAL) programme distributes computers annually to girls and boys en-

tering secondary school, as well as to their teachers, underscoring the government's commitment to learning and to bridging the digital divide.

In Trinidad and Tobago, one of the main challenges of the education system is not the exclusion or marginalisation of young girls, but that our young women are significantly outperforming their male counterparts. The problem is rather the underachievement of boys and young men. Therefore, we have sought to target young males in mentorship and skills-building programmes.

Our thrust to bridge the digital divide has resulted in greater access to online tertiary education programmes, thereby opening the window of opportunity for both young men and women to learn at their own pace and achieve their own academic goals while they pursue their careers.

As Commonwealth Chair, you had projected an increase in women's representation in parliament and cabinet to 30 percent minimum, 50 percent where the first has been reached. Was that a successful projection? Has it been achieved in your own government?

The government of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to establishing mechanisms to accelerate the achievement of gender equality in political participation and representation at all levels of the electoral process. It is also dedicated to ensuring women's full participation on the basis of equality with men in all areas of public life, including governmental bodies, the judiciary, trade unions, the private sector, political parties, employers' organisations, research and academic institutions, and national corporations.

My government intends to support these objectives by providing gender awareness training for recruiting bodies, including political parties, to ensure that women participate equally; and by implementing mechanisms to evaluate and monitor progress.

I am pleased to report that there have been increases in women's overall participation in national leadership and decision-making in Trinidad and Tobago. Participation of women has increased in the Lower House from 11.1 percent in 2001 to 28.6 percent in 2010, and that figure has been maintained up to 2012.

We are currently preparing for local government elections in 2013 and it is my hope that we will see increased women's participation in the local government arena. As of April 2012, there were 40 female councillors, accounting for 30 percent of persons in local government. ●

Time to ease off the gas

With its booming oil and gas industry, Trinidad and Tobago fared well in the global economic downturn, but the government must act now to move beyond the country's dependency on its finite resources and focus on diversifying the economy – only then will it sustain growth and stability, increase employment opportunities and reduce its worrying high crime rate

Trinidad and Tobago is the most industrialised nation in the Caribbean, and its economic performance is the envy of its partners in the 15-nation Caribbean Community (CARICOM). There is good cause for envy. At the end of 2011, with a high-income GNI per capita of TTD15,040, the 1.3 million people of the twin-island Caribbean state enjoyed a low unemployment rate of 5.8 percent, a low debt to GDP ratio of 33 percent, and high gross official reserves of US\$9.8 billion (over 13 months of imports).

Additionally, the British company, BP, just unearthed 1 trillion cubic feet of new gas; the state-owned company, Petrotrin, recently discovered 48 million barrels of oil; in December the most successful bid round in the country's history was held with BHP Billiton of Australia winning rights to explore in four deepwater blocks; and the government just signed an agreement with a joint venture consortium led by Mitsubi-

shi and involving a local company, Neal and Massy, for a methanol complex.

That is the credit side of the balance sheet. On the debit side, the country suffers from high crime; it is highly dependent on exports of its hydrocarbon resources, which will face new competition in the coming years; its manufacturing and agricultural sectors are in urgent need of an overhaul to make them competitive; and its services sector, particularly its financial services, are limited to Caribbean markets because of increased pressure on financial centres by extra-territorial laws of the USA and costly regulatory requirements, initiated the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Trinidad and Tobago is, therefore, at a pivotal point in its economic development strategy. It has to find ways of maximising the benefits of the remaining years of its oil

and gas industry while developing the productive and competitive capacity of its manufacturing, agricultural and service sectors.

These are challenges to which its present government is alert and that it has set about tackling. Trinidad and Tobago's future growth and development will rest on how successful the government is in overcoming the challenges.

The country's positive economic performance is directly due to exports of its hydrocarbon resources, particularly gas, oil and petrochemicals, which, in 2011, accounted for 45.3 percent of GDP and 82.3 percent of export receipts. But, while the oil and gas industry brings in massive revenues, it employs only 4 percent of the country's workforce. Income is, therefore, unevenly distributed. Traditional sectors of agriculture and manufacturing have declined, and progress has been slow in the development of other industries that can contribute to sustained





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In Trinidad, we celebrate our recent wins of providing full Agency Services, Drilling and Catering Crews for both Offshore Drilling Rigs, the Offshore Vigilant contracted by BHP Billiton (Trinidad-2C) Limited and the West Jaya contracted by BP Trinidad and Tobago LLC.

Both our Offshore Manpower Supply Company and Offshore Catering Company operate within a unionized environment and we have executed Memoranda of Agreement with the Oilfield Workers Trade Union.

► growth. High incidents of violent crime have also scarred the country, discomfiting its local population, but, interestingly, have not damaged foreign investment, which doubled in 2011–12 compared to 2010–11.

The present People's Partnership (PP) government, led by the country's first woman prime minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, came to office almost three years ago in May 2010 deeply conscious that to achieve a stable and sustainable economy in the future it had to get the most out of oil and gas assets and create new opportunities in agriculture, manufacturing and services, especially because energy assets are inevitably finite.

Reports indicate that the country's proved oil reserves now stand at approximately 728.3 million barrels, and its gas reserves at 408.2 billion cubic metres. The new government was also acutely conscious that the social stability of the country – as much as its appeal for investment – was teetering on

the brink, pushed there by high instances of violent crime fuelled by drug trafficking. The entire Caribbean region is a transshipment area between the supply countries in South America and the demand countries in Europe and the USA. Trinidad and Tobago is especially vulnerable because of its proximity to the South American coast.

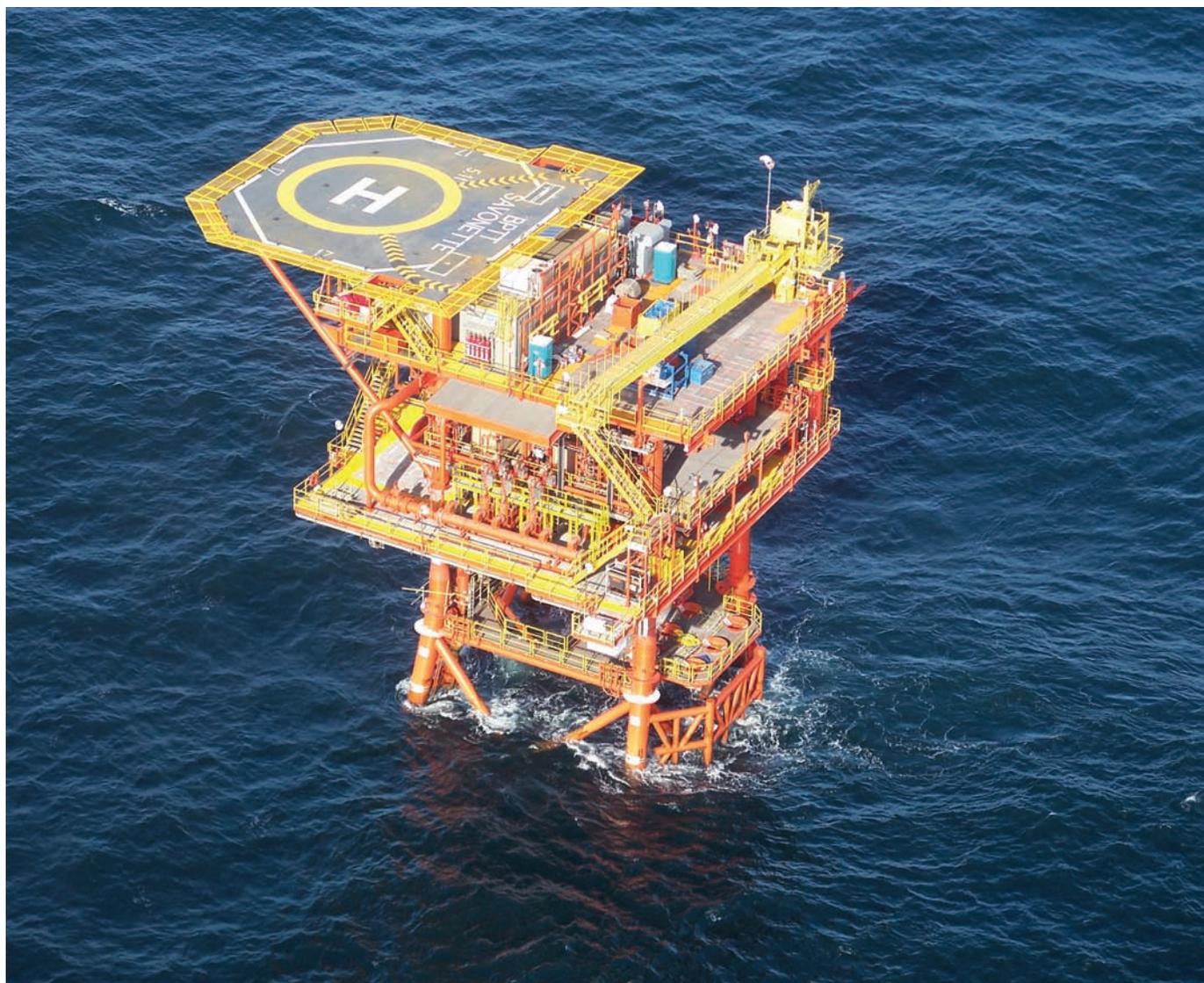
To its credit, on coming into office, the government set about tackling both the economic priorities and the crime imperatives simultaneously. In August 2011, it imposed a state of emergency (SoE) after a spike in crime. A recent US State Department report confirmed that during the SoE, which expired in December 2011, the number of murders was greatly reduced – down to 354 in 2011 from 480 in 2010, 508 in 2009 and 550 in 2008.

At the root of Trinidad and Tobago's social challenges, including crime, is maintaining and improving the country's earn-

ings and spreading the resulting economic benefits across the population in a fashion that is more equitable than has been obtained in the 50 years since independence.

Recognising this, the present government has been unique in the Caribbean by launching a Medium Term Policy Framework (MTPF) for the period 2011–14. The MTPF is designed to foster a sustainable and stable economy in the future. It is the brainchild of the country's Planning Minister, Dr Bhoë Tewarie, a former principal of the Trinidad campus of the University of the West Indies. Tewarie was also the chief architect of the PP's election manifesto. Therefore, the MTPF is, unusually, a mix of political objectives with rigorous criteria for measuring whether or not objectives have been met.

According to the MTPF, the government has embarked on a number of strategies to ensure sustained macro-economic stability



The Savonette gas field is located off the shore of Trinidad and has a production capacity of one billion cubic feet per day

and growth. It has targeted seven clusters to diversify the economy. These are: downstream energy and energy services; food sustainability; tourism; finance; ICT-driven industries; dry dock/ship repair/ship building; and creative industries.

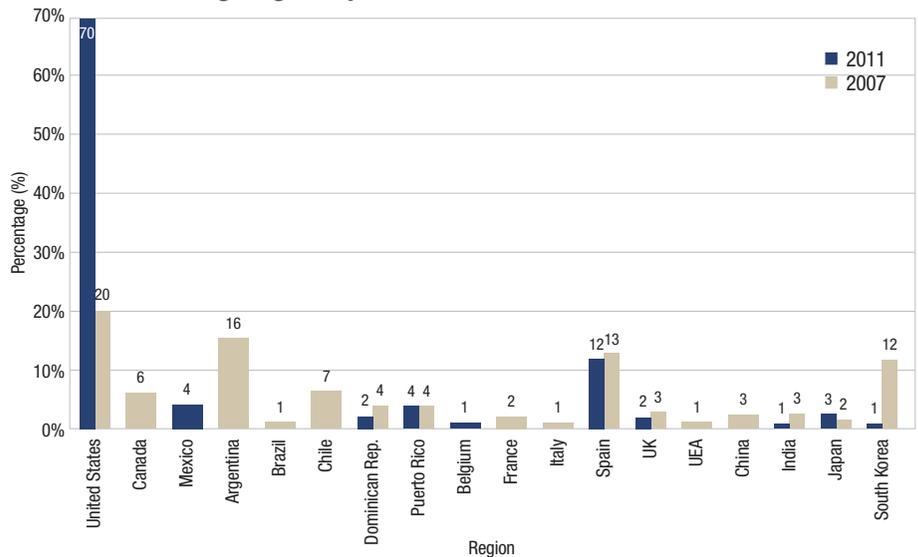
Trinidad and Tobago currently ranks 69th out of 185 nations for ease of doing business, as measured by the World Bank. To be really competitive outside the oil and gas industry, where it has a natural resource advantage, the country has to do much better to attract investment. In response to that summons, the government has taken some bold steps, among them measures to ease delays in customs and to fast-track action on investment. For instance, a ‘one stop’ facility, investTT, has been created to support investment. Further, unlike any other Caribbean country, a ‘Performance Framework’ with targets has been established to assess progress on the MTPF. The framework has laid down requirements to strengthen competitiveness, toughen standards, raise productivity and increase the country’s attractiveness to investors.

The journey will be arduous, but Trinidad and Tobago has put its feet on the ladder, and, in doing so, has started a climb that many other developing countries are failing to acknowledge as important and necessary.

In this effort, the government has gained the confidence and support of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which approved a new Country Strategy with Trinidad and Tobago in November 2011. Specifically, the strategy aims to help the country to transition its economy from one that is dependent on the oil and gas industry. Implementation of the strategy envisages funding of around TTD\$1.6 billion over the period 2011–15. The IDB has identified the main areas of its involvement as: trade, public sector modernisation, education, housing and citizen security. In 2011, it approved loans of TTD\$290 million, and it says that the current loan portfolio consists of eight loans for a total of US\$205 million, of which 93 percent is undisbursed. There is clearly, therefore, a gap in the government’s take-up of the IDB’s support, and this would suggest the need to accelerate implementation of the strategic plan.

Such acceleration is made urgent because of the market threat posed by the production of shale gas in the USA. It is anticipated that within the next decade, the USA will not only be self-sufficient in gas because of shale gas production, but it will also be an exporter. This means that, in addition to losing its market for gas in the USA, Trinidad and Tobago will have to compete with

Trinidad and Tobago’s gas export destinations



Source: BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2008 and 2012 respectively

the USA for the sale of gas in the global market.

Sensibly, Trinidad and Tobago’s gas producers have been diversifying their export destinations successfully to other higher price markets. By 2011, the US market, which accounted for 70 percent of Trinidad and Tobago’s gas in 2007, had already been reduced to 20 percent.

The journey will be arduous, but Trinidad and Tobago has put its feet on the ladder, and has started a climb that many other developing countries are failing to acknowledge as important and necessary

The two good things with regard to the oil and gas industry is first, competition from the USA is not immediate; and second, there is time both to increase the production of existing known reserves of oil and gas, and to lay a new economic foundation in manufacturing, agriculture, tourism and services, including financial services. This is why implementation of the country strategy in cooperation with the IDB assumes very great importance.

Apart from the support of international financial institutions, such as the IDB, Trinidad and Tobago is fortunate that it can call

on the resources of its Heritage and Stabilization Fund (HSF), which was created in 2007 to save and invest surplus petroleum revenues derived from production business. As of September 2011, the HSF had assets of TTD\$4.1 billion. The government has run small budget deficits over the past three years and has not drawn down on the HSF. Further, the HSF is invested prudently in low risk assets outside Trinidad and Tobago and unconnected to the energy sector.

It is a matter for the Trinidad and Tobago government to decide – and it would be hotly debated in the country’s parliament – on whether more of the proceeds of the HSF should be used for development projects now or savings increased to cater for revenue downturns in the future, as well as to enlarge the fund from which future generations could derive an income.

The IMF, in a June 2012 discussion of the country, favoured “a clearer focus on savings together with more constraints on withdrawals”. But the government seems to prefer a separation of the ‘savings’ and ‘stabilisation’ aspects of the HSF obviously to give it room to utilise the country’s own savings to finance the improvement of the manufacturing, agriculture and services sector and diversify its markets.

However that discussion turns out, Trinidad and Tobago is in the enviable position of being able to make a choice at a time when it is universally agreed that its economy is once again set to grow. ●

Sir Ronald Sanders is a Visiting Fellow at London University, a consultant and former Caribbean diplomat

Trinidad & Tobago

Shipbuilding & Repair Cluster: Diversifying our economy, one ship at a time ...

Trinidad and Tobago is an ideal place for the development of a viable and competitive maritime cluster.

The Shipbuilding & Repair Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited is the commercial entity of the Shipbuilding and Repair Cluster, which started as an initiative of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Investments (MTI) and was conceived in 2007 to plan and carefully develop this 'new' area of maritime activity within the twin island country as part of the greater move for economic diversification away from the energy sector.

With an established maritime history and the benefit of a favourable geographic location, Trinidad and Tobago is strategically located on key trade routes connecting the North and South American continents. The domestic commercial maritime sector evolved as an offshoot of a rapidly expanding energy sector, which required a strong maritime presence to support offshore exploration activity. The sector also benefited from a growing cargo and transshipment trade, as the country developed into a major hub to facilitate trade between the smaller Caribbean islands.

Trinidad and Tobago has three major cargo ports with a further deep-water port planned for La Brea. With the increase in trade agreements and technological advances, the global shipping industry has gained even greater importance. The Panama Canal expansion due to be completed in 2014 will see more trade passing through our

Shipbuilding and repair is of strategic importance in many respects. It develops advanced technologies that offer considerable spin-offs to other sectors; it provides essential means of transport for regional and international trade; and it supplies maritime companies and governments with advanced vessels.

region, requiring more transshipment hubs and ports adapted to the new size of vessel. This country could see over 300 additional ships needing port services and Port of Spain and Point Lisas will not be able to carry that load. We need to put the infrastructure in place or risk becoming a secondary port.

In addition to port expansion, our government is seeking to enhance growth in the shipbuilding and repairs sector as our geographical position is favourable for ship and yacht repairs. Trinidad is also blessed with having one of the largest natural sheltered harbours in the world, the Gulf of Paria, which is outside the hurricane belt. With our highly developed yachting industry, several hundred yachts visit the islands each year to repair, maintain and store yachts.



Wilfred de Gannes, S&R Deputy Leader

The current local ship repair facilities for servicing smaller vessels, mainly fishing boats, oil and gas supply vessels and tugs should be expanded to include tankers, LNG vessels and container ships.

Global shipbuilding has suffered in the recent economic downturn, especially with the low demand for larger ships decimating that side of the industry. This has created a new market for the Shipbuilding and Repair Cluster as thousands of these ships which were ordered in 2007 and recently launched by shipyards in South Korea, Japan and the People's Republic of China have to be 'laid-up', some without ever having transported a single shipment of cargo. In light of our focus on smaller and more flexible vessels this has proved to be an opportunity for us, and we have defied economic stagnation by making the sector a key FDI earner. We are proud to be spearheading the nation's drive for diversification.

Our country can look to become the Singapore of the west, which at present has 20 per cent of the global repair and conversion market share for ocean-going vessels because of their strategic geographic location. With a total of 80 licensed shipyards and the employment of some 141,000 maritime workers, Singapore's shipyard and offshore sector today contributes around US\$9.4 billion to their economy.

What better diversification of our economy could we hope for at this time? Our country has substantial foreign exchange earning capacity.

In the dynamic maritime industry there is an old saying: 'if you stop moving, you're dead' - and we do not intend to stop moving!

Overcoming political barriers to economic revival

Trinidad and Tobago's energy-driven economy has survived the international recession without suffering too badly; but to make the most of economic possibilities for growth, the four-party coalition People's Partnership government of Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar has to overcome several political and electoral hurdles

Although positive about her government's ability to move the economy forward, Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar and her government face serious political and industrial relations challenges, including two local government elections and a general election required by the constitution in 2015.

Not least of the problems facing Persad-Bissessar is keeping the coalition government, originally composed of five parties, now reduced to four, intact. In June 2012, two years after being part of the People's Partnership that won the general elections, the Movement for Social Justice (MSJ), which comprises the trade union movement, left the PP coalition, accusing it of going back on its manifesto promises and being overrun with corrupt activity. "It is in this context that the National executive and Activists Council of the Movement for Social Justice have decided that our party will remove itself from the People's Partnership coalition of political parties," said MSJ leader, David Abdulah.

Internal conflict has not ended with the departure of the MSJ. The second largest party in the coalition, the Congress of the People (COP), has often taken public positions against government and cabinet decisions and actions that have been instigated by the major coalition partner, the United National Congress, the party of the prime minister.

Notably, COP leader, Prakash Maharaj, has called on Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar to suspend Jack Warner from her cabinet. A senior minister, Warner is facing allegations of corruption while he was vice-president of Fifa, the world football body. In December 2012, while facing a serious challenge from hunger-striker Dr Wayne Kublalsingh who was protesting the passage of a portion of a major highway through a series of 13 communities, former COP leader, Winston Dookeran, came out publicly against the aggressive and non-yielding position of Persad-Bissessar and a few of her UNC ministers. He called on the prime minister to exercise "compassion and compromise" in dealing



Local elections will be held later this year in Trinidad

with Kublalsingh and the protesting villagers.

Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar frowned on "such individuals and groups who are seen to be betraying the trust that has been placed in the Partnership", and accused them of engaging "in what amounts to blackmail of my leadership".

One of the major political challenges faced by Persad-Bissessar and her government came from the appointment in January 2011 of a low-level technician head of the country's major secret service, the Security Intelligence Agency. After steadfastly defending the appointment for two weeks and demanding that the media "move on" from the subject, the prime minister admitted the appointment had been an error, apologised, labelled it "my biggest mistake" and vowed that it would not happen again.

Undoubtedly, though, the biggest political fallout occurred in August 2012 and has come to be known as the 'Section 34 fiasco'. Having promised parliament to delay for two to three years any legislation allowing judges to dismiss criminal cases which have been awaiting trial for more than ten years, the government quietly proclaimed law Section 34 of the Administration of Justice Act. The move could have resulted in billion-dollar corruption charges being dropped against several former

government ministers and financiers of the ruling party.

Section 34 was quickly repealed and the Justice Minister fired after an almighty furore broke out. But large segments of the national community across all political allegiances have targeted the prime minister, her Attorney-General and the entire cabinet for allegedly implementing legislation to free its financiers and former ministerial colleagues.

Two huge public demonstrations organised by the opposition People's National Movement, the majority of the labour movement, and supported by several civic groups put pressure on the government. A no confidence vote against the prime minister in parliament followed (which could not be passed given the government's built-in majority in the parliament) and has seriously damaged the credibility of the government.

Widespread negative public comment carried in the print and electronic media against the government for its handling of the Section 34 fiasco continues. With its back against the proverbial wall, the prime minister and her inner (UNC) cabinet have taken to attacking the media, charging them with bias. The government is also facing severe criticism and demonstrations from significant sections of the trade union movement that are demanding long-delayed wage negotiations in the public sector.

In this hostile political environment, the government faces a poll in January to elect the Tobago House of Assembly, which controls the domestic affairs of Tobago, and local government elections later this year in Trinidad. In these elections, the People's Partnership – fractured and disunited within and being confronted by a revived People's National Movement – faces what amounts to referenda on its government. There is no question that the political and industrial obstacles to overcome are many as the government seeks to resuscitate economic revival. ●

Tony Fraser is a freelance journalist based in Trinidad and Tobago

“In the Trinidad of my childhood, there was a respect for and delight in language well used”

INTERVIEW

Vahni Capildeo, poet, teacher and lexicographer

Vahni Capildeo, based in Oxford, was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in 1973. After reading English at Oxford University, she took up a Research Fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, and published her first poetry collection, *No Traveller Returns*, in 2003. Four further books of poetry and prose followed, and her next collection, *Utter*, will be published with Peepal Tree Press later this year. She currently teaches at Glasgow University

The daughter of a politician and cosmopolitan mother, Trinidadian author and poet Vahni Capildeo comes from a large extended family that includes author V S Naipaul. Here, she talks to *Global* about her earliest childhood memories, her undergraduate life in Oxford, her love of language – from Old English to Chinese – and which authors’ work have inspired her. Though a great admirer of contemporary Caribbean writers, with their activist stance and ability to connect with real issues, Capildeo shuns the idea that her poetry and prose have been shaped by her Caribbean background. This becomes clear as she offers us an insight into her own unique works, as diverse in their form as in their themes.

Global: What are your most vivid early memories and images of Trinidad?

Vahni Capildeo: My parents moved to what is still my mother’s house two years before I was born. This house is in Port of Spain. There was always a feeling that the island was a cosmopolitan, travellers’ place. A great strength of the island mentality is that ability to cross cultures, cross space. My great-grandfather once came stalking up the driveway, and he was Indian, an upright Rajput in white, incomprehensibly ancient, bringing a young banana tree as a gift and helping us plant it. He had not met my brother and me before, but blessed us kindly on the head.

How did you get to study English at Oxford? What were the best things about Oxford undergraduate life for you?

I never seriously considered studying any-

where except at Oxford, because I wanted to learn Old English, to get to the roots of my language and its literature. I knew that that might involve hard labour. It has paid off, as the Anglo-Saxon metre and way of writing about the sea and exile can pierce me with heat and cold, untranslated, as true poetry does. We didn’t own any cold-weather clothing, so in those pre-Internet days, determined to settle things better than provisioning myself and flying expensively near Christmas time to a winter Oxford interview, I wrote letters to various colleges, asking if tutors in Modern Languages,

The rest of the world is already in, or passing through, Trinidad. It is time for the rest of the world to come to terms with this archipelagic sensability, where criss-crossing and fluidity are a way of life

Music or English would give me a serious pre-interview interview in the summer. The Christ Church English tutors gave me a thorough grilling, which I enjoyed.

Something, too, about the openness of Christ Church Meadow and the college’s great uncloistered quadrangle appealed as somewhere to live, where the sense of mere

personality could be eased and quietened. The best things about Oxford life were the workload, the tutorial system and the friendships.

When, and why, did you decide to become a writer? Were you writing poetry from your teens, or earlier?

I always intended to become a writer. By the time I was six I was very serious about doing ‘poems’ in pencil in copybooks. In the Trinidad of my childhood, there was a respect for and delight in language well used; also, an awareness of sunken languages, still spoken by some of Trinidad’s people: Romance languages, African languages, North and South Indian languages, Chinese.

As a writer, are you to a greater or lesser extent influenced by your Caribbean background? Does this sense of ‘influence’ matter? What about politics?

The greatest influence on my writing life is less my Caribbean childhood than my relationships with contemporary Caribbean writers, especially those based in the region, such as Nicholas Laughlin, Andre Badoo and Vladimir Lucien. Talented writers in Trinidad are less likely to be beached in the academy than they are in the UK. Trinidad’s a small place.

Nicholas Laughlin, for example, co-directs Alice Yard, a public art space, is programme director for the [Trinidad and Tobago’s annual] Bocas Lit Fest and edits two significant magazines. Andre Badoo is an investigative journalist, trained as a lawyer. They are in touch with live issues

more directly than at the level of protest: organising responses to floods exacerbated by climate change or dedicating hours to understanding government process.

Which classic writers do you love, and why?

'Love' is perhaps not quite the word. From childhood, I love E Nesbit for her way of not talking down to the reader and sense of social comedy; Paul Keens-Douglas for his wit and perfect ear for monologue; and Robert Louis Stevenson, who writes the childhood feelings children can't articulate. Later, sometimes it was the writers I didn't love who stuck with me. For example, I am not sure that I love Henry James, yet I return to the astonishing vividness of some of his descriptions of objects and of wildflowers in *Portrait of a Lady*.

Your five books are *No Traveller Returns* (2003), *One Scattered Skeleton*, *Person Animal Figure* (2005), *Undraining Sea* (2009) and *Dark & Unaccustomed Words* (2012). Can you say something about each?

No Traveller Returns was conceived as a book, beginning in the Caribbean and ranging outwards via England and Iceland into the country of death. There are dialogues, lyrics, imaginary drama, some prose poems, even short fiction.

One Scattered Skeleton is a prose memoir, dealing with topics such as attitudes to mental illness, femininity and homosexuality in Trinidad. Each chapter explores a different form, a different way of exploring truth – personal letters, a diary, a commentary on others' texts. Excerpts have been published in anthologies and journals and on websites, but not the whole book. *The Guardian* journalist Ann Morgan picked it up as her Trinidad choice in her 'Year of Reading the World' project.

Person Animal Figure is a series of dramatic monologues. *Undraining Sea* and *Dark & Unaccustomed Words* are the second and third parts of the project begun with *No Traveller Returns*, moving through the endless play of cities and situations reflecting one another to the exploration of the possibilities of form.

My fourth full poetry collection, *Utter*, due out shortly, is my favourite book to date, and the end of that style of dramatic monologues and palimpsestic poetry, at least for now.

I have also co-authored *All Your Houses* with Andre Bago. The prose poems and photographs show abandoned or decaying urban spaces in Port of Spain still exploding with life: greenery, clutter, staircases into the sky.



You have worked in academia in Britain. What views do you have about the UK system as compared to (say) the system in Trinidad?

I have no direct professional experience of the academic system in Trinidad, other than giving the occasional talk or workshop. There seems to be very good uptake of the Trinidad government's free tertiary education, with a number of mature students qualifying or requalifying in areas that would otherwise be too costly, such as law. If Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* is right, this investment in education might well pay off in a generation or so.

Quality of student life there is characterised by closeness of Trinidadian youngsters to their parents and families, similar to that in Latin countries. University life in Trinidad is not as much part of a rite of breaking with origins as it is in the UK. There continues to be at least something of the interweaving of generations. The older generation truly values education, remem-

bering a time when it was less accessible. They know first hand that education, like health, is not a profit-making business, unless it is run at a loss in terms of human capital. As for the UK, since my Fellowship in Cambridge, I have spent very little time working in academia per se, and always in fixed-term creative writing posts rather than in, say, manuscript research.

How do you think Trinidad faces, culturally, the rest of the world?

The rest of the world is already in, or passing through, Trinidad. The island is at a strategic point, a flight path for humans as well as many species of bird. People are very much hooked into new communications technologies; and the population is multi-ethnic and migratory to a degree that makes London look simple. It is time for the rest of the world to come to terms with this archipelagic sensibility, where criss-crossing and fluidity are not jargon terms but a way of life. ●