

OPINION & INSIGHTS

Making the case again for National Heroes in recognition of our Independence celebrations

AS I SEE IT



By Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph

On July 24, 1983, as Saint Lucia commemorated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Simón Bolívar and named the park in recognition of Jn Baptiste Bideau and the Venezuelan revolutionaries, then Prime Minister John Compton offered words that remain hauntingly relevant.

He declared: "From the dawn of history, from the organisation of peoples into tribes and then into nations, man realised that no tribe, no nation, no people can survive without its heroes."

He continued with an admonition that, four decades later, we must admit we have not sufficiently heeded: "As a new nation, Saint Lucia has created and honoured few of its heroes, and we are apt to treat our great men as disposable commodities, and their good works are often interred with their bones, and this is a major deficiency in our national psyche which we must strive to correct."

Compton was right then. He remains right now.

As a society, we have too often failed to meaningfully acknowledge, appreciate and institutionalise gratitude for those who shaped our national journey – from the pre-Independence struggles of labour and political reform to the architects of our modern development. We wait until funerals to speak glowingly. We deliver eulogies where we should have delivered honours. In the colloquial wisdom of our people, we miss the water till the well runs dry; we give flowers only when the hands that built us can no longer receive them.

This failure is not merely ceremonial. It is educational. Many of our young people, and indeed many adults, remain unaware of the individuals whose sacrifices and intellect shaped Saint Lucia's political institutions, economic reforms, cultural identity, and global reputation.

We lean heavily on oral history, which, while rich, inevitably fades with generations. Our investment in written history, documentation, biography, and civic education has not kept pace with our need for national memory.

There is also a cultural modesty among Saint Lucians. We do not boast. We do not

trumpet our achievements. Yet humility, without historical preservation, can become national amnesia.

Independence, therefore, is not merely about flag-raising and fireworks. It is about storytelling. It is about answering a profound question: what type of Saint Lucian do we wish to inspire? And how have we demonstrated, beyond rhetoric, that excellence born on this 238-square-mile island matters?

When we proudly proclaim that we are the only nation in the world with two Nobel Laureates per capita, Sir Arthur Lewis and Sir Derek Walcott, we tell a powerful story. But it must not end there. The Nobel Prize is not the only metric of national contribution. There are educators, jurists, artists, civil servants, community organisers, entrepreneurs, farmers, public health pioneers and cultural innovators whose labour transformed communities and whose legacy sustains us daily.

Yet layered upon this conversation is a deeper psychological inheritance: colonialism.

Enslavement and colonial domination did not merely extract labour and wealth; they reshaped self-perception. They conditioned us to measure success by external validation, metropolitan approval, foreign credentials, and outside recognition. What is "over there" is often presumed superior; what emerges "from here" must prove itself twice.

This has left us ambitious but anxious, striving outward while hesitating inward. Even when Saint Lucians receive global acclaim, we sometimes fail to convert that external validation into sustained local reverence and institutional honour.

And yet, consider how far we have come. From centuries of enslavement to Independence in 1979; from plantation dependency to diversified ambition; from colonial governance to constitutional self-rule, our progress is neither accidental nor inevitable. It was built by people. Real people. Named people. Brave people.

It is in this spirit that former Prime Minister Kenny D. Anthony advanced the creation of a National Heroes framework

through the **National Honours and Awards Act, Chapter 17:08**, and the establishment of a National Heroes Commission. In doing so, he sought to give legislative structure to Compton's earlier admonition.

Dr Anthony explained the purpose clearly:

"Government and Opposition have taken action to ensure that those exceptional individuals who have toiled tirelessly for the betterment of our great nation are honoured. This is part of our collective desire to reshape our political landscape, moving away from the divisiveness which has destructively dominated the operations of national institutions towards a spirit of inclusiveness and due recognition. Many have served with distinction, honour, commitment and selflessness, and so we must recognise them as our heroes for without their contribution, we would not be the nation we are today."

This was not a partisan proposal. It was a nation-building instrument.

The legislative architecture already exists. Section 12 of the Act establishes the **Order of National Hero**. Section 15 provides for the creation of a Commission. Appointment powers are distributed among the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and members appointed in the Governor General's own discretion, deliberately embedding balance and bipartisanship.

The criteria are neither vague nor sentimental. To qualify, an individual must have rendered outstanding service that altered the course of Saint Lucian history, demonstrated visionary and pioneering leadership, achieved extraordinary excellence, redounding to the credit of Saint Lucia, or, through heroic sacrifice, improved the economic and social conditions of our people.

In other words, we already possess the tools. What we require is political will, public engagement and cultural urgency.

Imagine the civic power of a properly constituted and active National Heroes Commission.

Imagine school curricula that include structured modules on Saint Lucian nation-

builders.

Imagine Independence celebrations where nominations are transparently considered and debated.

Imagine young people seeing living examples of excellence formally affirmed by the Republic.

Heroes are not about idolatry. They are about anchoring values. A nation that names its heroes names its aspirations.

If we fail to institutionalise recognition, we risk sending an unintended message: that extraordinary service is optional; that sacrifice is forgettable; that nation-building goes unnoticed. Conversely, when we honour excellence, we create a virtuous cycle. Recognition inspires contribution; contribution inspires pride; pride inspires preservation.

As we celebrate another year of Independence, we must move beyond slogans of being "Dam Proud Lucians". Pride must be substantive. It must be rooted in knowledge of who built us and how. It must be codified in law and reflected in public ceremony.

Compton warned us in 1983 that neglecting our heroes was "a major deficiency in our national psyche which we must strive to correct". More than 40 years later, the challenge stands.

The question is no longer whether we have heroes. We do.

The question is whether we will finally honour them while they can still hear us say thank you.

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