A Flag Without a Deed

Why Caribbean Independence Stopped at the Constitution

Discussion Paper

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This paper sets out in short form an argument developed at length in "A Flag Without a Deed: Ownership, Capability, and the Unfinished Business of Caribbean Independence" (forthcoming). It draws on two companion working papers: "Comparative Advantage, Cheap Consumption, and Poor Development Outcomes in the Caribbean" (Ram 2025) and "Beyond the Headline Number: Why Human Potential Maximisation Should Be the Organising Objective of Development Policy in the Caribbean" (Ram 2026).

Summary

Caribbean independence handed over political power. It left ownership exactly where it was.

Sixty years later, our economies still work the way the colonial economy worked. We produce a narrow range of things the outside world wants. Our industries barely connect to each other. We depend on foreign money to cover the gap. And the money we do save at home gets spent rather than invested in the skills and industries that would pay for the next generation.

The usual explanation is that outside forces hold us back. Those forces are real, and this paper describes them. But they are no longer the main problem. We have room to act that we are not using. The things now holding the structure in place are mostly our own:

- A business class that makes its money bringing goods in, not making them here.
- A banking system that lends for imported cars more readily than for factories.
- A budget in which government transfers and subsidies make up for wages the economy cannot pay.
- A school system built to pick out a few children rather than teach all of them.

That last point carries the paper's central claim. The Caribbean is said to have a natural advantage in low-wage service work and in digging things out of the ground. It does not. We produce that disadvantage ourselves, one school year at a time, using institutions we inherited and chose to keep.

1. We won the flag. We did not finish the job.

In April 2026, the IMF projected that public debt in the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union would stay near 75 per cent of GDP through 2030. The regional target is 60 per cent by 2035. Over the same period, ECLAC forecasts growth of 1.7 per cent for 2026 in the Caribbean outside Guyana, mostly because slower growth in the United States means fewer tourists.

Those numbers are not surprising, and that is the point. These are sovereign countries. Several have governed themselves for more than sixty years. Yet how fast we grow still depends on how much people in another country feel like spending, and how much we can spend depends on what foreign lenders think of us.

There are two standard explanations.

The first says the problem comes from outside: a colonial inheritance kept alive by unfair terms of trade, foreign ownership, and a global financial system built elsewhere. Rodney (1972) gave this view its best-known statement. Underdevelopment is not an early stage on the road to development. It is a relationship between countries, deliberately created and continuously maintained. A poor country is not a young rich one. It is partly the result of one.

The second explanation, which supplies most of the advice we get from international institutions, says the problem is bad governance.

This paper accepts the history in the first account but not where it usually ends up. Nobody serious disputes that our economic structure has colonial origins. But an argument that ends by asking the old imperial powers to fix a problem they created has already given up what it claims to want. If political independence without economic change is empty, then most of the fix has to come from us, for ourselves.

Césaire made this point when he resigned from the French Communist Party in 1956. His reason was that the freedom of colonised people could not be treated as a side issue inside a European movement's programme, however friendly that movement believed itself to be. He was not saying allies are useless. He was saying that if you place the power to decide somewhere else, you have already lost what you were fighting for.

2. What changed at independence, and what did not

The colonial Caribbean economy was not a weak national economy. It was a strong part of somebody else's economy. Everything else follows from that difference.

James (1938) supplies the other half of the inheritance, and it is easy to forget when we talk about structures. Enslaved people were not the objects of Caribbean history. They made it. San Domingo was the first place the question got asked and answered: does legal freedom deliver real freedom? The answer then is the answer now. It does not follow automatically. Freedom without land,

without credit, without control over what gets produced is a legal status, not an economic condition. That line runs straight from 1804 to 1962 to today.

The plantation organised everything around one crop grown for sale abroad: the land, the labour, the money, the credit, the shipping, the selling. The owners lived elsewhere, so the profits went elsewhere instead of being reinvested here. We grew what we did not eat. What we ate, we did not grow. Nothing linked up, because the estate bought its supplies and sold its output inside its own foreign network.

Beckford's key insight was that this structure produced a particular social order: a small group who owned things, a middle layer of professionals and merchants, and a large working population. The order kept renewing itself because the same structure controlled who got land, who got credit, and who got educated.

That is the part of the inheritance that survived most completely. In some sectors, ownership changed nationality after independence. It never became widespread. Neither did the institution that controls entry into the middle layer. The selection exam at age eleven still does in 2026 what it was built to do in the 1800s.

Independence itself was negotiated to avoid disruption. Britain wanted an orderly handover that protected property rights, existing contracts, currency arrangements and the investment climate. The nationalist parties taking over had their own reasons to agree. They were led mostly by professionals, trade unionists, and the rising middle class, and they promised national dignity and better public services. Both could be delivered without touching who owned what.

Fanon described what results: a national middle class that does not replace the colonial economic elite but becomes its local agent. We had already spotted the same figure in our own writing. In Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, the village's own son, Mr Slime, builds a Friendly Society that ends up owning the land the villagers live on. Then they are evicted from it. Lovelace's Ivan Morton is the same man seen from the village's side: educated at the community's expense, elected to represent it, moved into the estate house, where representing the people turns out to mean no longer being one of them.

3. Why we never built the alternative

In the ten years or so around independence, this region produced some of the best structural economic thinking anywhere in the developing world. It also produced a plan.

Thomas argued that we should steadily align what we produce with what we consume. Demas argued that small countries could only do this together, so regional integration was a development strategy, not a trade deal. Brewster and Thomas turned it into a blueprint for regional production.

The plan was never carried out. Not because anyone disproved it. A rival idea held the field, and still does.

Comparative advantage tells a country to specialise in whatever it makes relatively best and buy the rest. If your measured assets are sun, coastline and minerals, the instruction is obvious. Lewis's "industrialisation by invitation" is the same idea turned into policy.

Here is the crucial move in how the idea gets used today. What we measure is not how well we produce. It is how well we consume: how far a person's income stretches across goods sourced from anywhere in the world. Development becomes the ability to buy cheaply rather than the ability to make things.

The rest follows automatically. In Trinidad and Tobago, and in other Caribbean territories, roughly 70 per cent or more of what we consume is imported. Most jobs involve distributing, installing, servicing and selling those imports. An economy built this way does not need deep technical skill, because every global innovation is one shipping container away. It also does not need an educated population.

Two further consequences do not get anticipated.

First, wages are low because output per worker is low, and output per worker is low because we make very little of what we use.

Second, government steps in to make up the difference through transfers and subsidies. In Trinidad and Tobago, that is roughly half the central government budget. So the fiscal deficit is not proof of reckless spending. It is the price tag on an economy that cannot pay its workers enough to live on.

Lamming saw the shape of this arrangement from another angle, and Fanon (1952) had already described how it works inside a person. The colonised man comes to judge himself using categories handed to him by the coloniser, so the verdict feels like self-knowledge rather than something imposed. Prospero's real gift to Caliban is language, and with it the ideas Caliban must use to understand his own lower position, which now looks to him like a plain description of the world rather than somebody's arrangement.

Comparative advantage is that gift in economic form. It is a real analytical tool, taught in every economics department in the region, and it hands Caribbean policymakers a way of seeing the plantation not as something done to us but as the best available option. An idea you have been trained to find obvious is harder to shift than any treaty.

But comparative advantage is built, not given. The evidence is now reasonably clear. Countries that defied their measured advantage went on to export more manufactured and more sophisticated goods. For middle-income and resource-rich countries, which is our category, defying it widened the range of exports rather than narrowing it (Lectard and Rougier 2018).

One condition is attached, and it matters more than the finding. If you defy your advantage by attracting foreign firms to set up assembly operations, you get what those authors call artefact

industrialisation. Export numbers improve, but no lasting upgrade happens because the skill was rented rather than built. Defiance based on skill built at home holds.

This is not an argument against foreign investment. It argues that foreign investment must come with a deliberate handover of skills and know-how. Capability that stays inside a foreign company's balance sheet never becomes ours, no matter how good the trade figures look.

4. The parts of the problem we own

Outside pressure is real. Our debt is mostly in foreign currency and priced as though small countries are risky. Tourism has the same shape the estate had, with a different product: demand comes from abroad and rises and falls with foreign business cycles, the inputs are imported, and a lot of the money leaks straight back out.

Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988) is still the most uncomfortable account of how that structure feels from the inside, and it is cited here for a particular reason. People remember the book for its anger at the tourist, the visitor whose holiday depends on not noticing what produces it. But the second half turns on the Antiguan government, on ministers getting rich off the arrangement, and on a library left in ruins for years behind a sign promising repairs. That is this paper's argument, written thirty-eight years earlier and without the economics. The outside relationship is real and degrading, and the way our own people run it is its own scandal. Kincaid refuses to choose between blaming the metropole and blaming ourselves. That refusal is correct.

The outside pressure goes beyond trade and tourism. Our financial centres get placed on lists by bodies where no CARICOM state has a meaningful vote, so a sovereign decision gets cancelled not by force or treaty but by the threat of being cut off from the payments system. A single hurricane can destroy several times a small country's annual output, and because we borrow to rebuild, climate exposure turns directly into debt.

None of this is a locked box. Inside the room those pressures leave us, we have made choices. Those choices have rebuilt the very structure we say we want to change.

Who owns. After independence, a local property-owning class did emerge, and it did accumulate. But it accumulated in moving goods around rather than making them: importing, distribution, retail, financial services, property. Its earnings depend on the volume of goods coming into the region, not the volume made here. Ram (2025) puts the distribution of gains and losses plainly. The big losers are citizens who cannot find decent work in their own country. The big winners are distributors and retailers.

Our largest home-grown conglomerates are a genuine achievement. They are Caribbean-owned, they operate across the region, and in several cases they pushed foreign firms out. But what they do matters more than who owns them. A serious programme to replace even a fifth of our consumer goods imports with regional production would cut into a meaningful share of their

earnings. That does not make them villains. It makes them rational. It does mean that import substitution is a domestic political fight first and an international negotiation second.

Land. The Caribbean is the only major post-slavery region that never carried out a full land redistribution. Emancipation freed the labour and kept the land where it was. Large areas of former estate land now sit idle, underused, or held for the price to rise. Family land often cannot be mortgaged or combined, which locks smallholders out of the credit they would need to farm commercially. We import food while arable land sits out of production. Nothing in the international financial system stops us from auditing our land, taxing it based on how it is used, or creating a legal route to settle title.

Credit. We are not short of savings. Pension funds, national insurance, credit unions and insurance companies hold assets that are large relative to GDP. The problem is what those savings pay for. In Trinidad and Tobago, leaving out real estate, roughly a quarter of consumer loans go to motor vehicles, seventeen per cent is credit card debt, and thirty-six per cent is refinancing and consolidation. On the business side, twelve per cent of credit went to manufacturing. Given what we consume, most consumer credit is really credit for buying imports. Institutional money piles into government paper.

The result is a closed circle. Workers' savings fund government deficits. Deficits fund transfers and subsidies. These transfers and subsidies fund the purchase of imports, which is what wages could not cover in the first place.

Fiscal choices. Tax holidays and duty concessions left over from the industrialisation-by-invitation era have become permanent in many countries. Ministers hand them out at their own discretion, usually with no expiry date, no published list of who gets them, and no cost shown in the budget. A country that gives up revenue to attract investment it would probably have received anyway, then borrows abroad to replace the money it gave away, has manufactured its own dependence.

Meanwhile, government purchasing goes almost entirely unused. CARICOM governments and their state companies are together the largest buyer in the regional economy, and we do not use that to guarantee demand for anything we make.

5. The exam at eleven

This is where the argument about class, the argument about skills, and the argument about comparative advantage all meet.

Barbados has kept the basic shape of its public education system since the Mitchinson commission of 1879, and the selection exam follows a model the British settled on in the 1940s and have since largely abandoned themselves. It was never designed to educate a population. It was designed to find a small group able to staff the administrative and professional jobs of the colonial state, and

to send everyone else into manual work. It is the machine that renews the social order Beckford described, and it now does so with democratic consent, in the name of merit.

It is a sorting device, and the sorting justifies itself.

Consider Canadian junior hockey, the example Gladwell (2008) made famous. The cut-off date for age groups is arbitrary, and children born just after it are slightly bigger and better coordinated than their classmates. That small early edge gets them better coaching, which makes them better players, which proves the original selection was right.

The eleven-plus does the same thing to children's lives. It is an early, crude, largely arbitrary sort. Its effects compound for forty years. Then unequal outcomes are offered as evidence that the sort was necessary.

The evidence that we are failing the average child is not ambiguous.

On the World Bank's Human Capital Index, Trinidad and Tobago scores 0.60, the highest in the independent Caribbean. Jamaica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines score 0.53. Guyana scores 0.50. Barbados, The Bahamas, Belize and most of the OECS cannot be scored at all, because we do not collect comparable data on what children actually learn. You cannot manage what you have not measured.

On that scale, we write off between a third and a half of every incoming group of children before they reach the labour market. Trinidad and Tobago records 9.1 learning-adjusted years of schooling against 12.4 years of expected attendance. That is three and a half years of every child's education producing nothing we can measure.

Exam results tell the same story. The regional benchmark is five or more CSEC subjects including mathematics and English. It stood at 41 per cent in 2024 and 44 per cent in 2025, with mathematics the binding constraint. But those percentages count only the children who registered and sat. Measure against the whole age group and the numbers collapse. Against a target of roughly 60 per cent of the age group, Jamaica has recorded around 19 per cent.

Reform is happening now, which makes this a live policy question rather than a complaint. Barbados has confirmed that the 2027 sitting will be the last, moving to a mix of continuous assessment and standardised testing from 2028. Most OECS states already use the Caribbean Primary Exit Assessment. Trinidad's SEA, Jamaica's PEP and Guyana's National Grade Six Assessment are still in place.

Here is the economic consequence, in one step. What an economy can produce depends on the typical worker, not the top tenth. You cannot build agro-processing, logistics, precision manufacturing, technical services, or a serious engineering and maintenance base on a workforce sorted at eleven and sent to schools with lower expectations and no respected technical alternative. We treated vocational education as where failures go. Germany, Switzerland and Singapore built theirs as a parallel route with real status.

So the Caribbean's supposed advantage in low-skill service and extraction is not something nature gave us. We manufacture it at home, one school cohort at a time, through an exam we inherited and decided to keep. That is the answer to anyone who says structural analysis is just an excuse for our own failures. The excuse and the failure are the same institution.

And the few we do educate well are the ones most likely to leave. Mishra (2006) found that Caribbean countries had lost between 10 and 40 per cent of their entire labour force to emigration to OECD countries, and that many had lost more than 70 per cent of people with more than twelve years of schooling. Around 40 per cent of nursing posts across the region have sat vacant, mostly because of migration. Our treasuries pay to train these people, and another country collects the return, permanently.

The same evidence offers hope. PAHO's survey work found that about 74 per cent of health workers already abroad would consider coming home if pay, conditions and promotion prospects improved. People are not leaving for the weather. They are leaving because of what the work pays here, and what it pays depends on what the economy makes.

And the window is closing. Live births in Trinidad and Tobago fell from 18,261 in 2015 to 12,768 in 2023. Fertility across the region averages around 1.8, below the replacement level of 2.1. A country with growing cohorts can make up for wasting talent by adding more people. A country with shrinking cohorts cannot.

There is a compensating fact. A smaller cohort is cheaper to educate well. The cost of a genuine whole-cohort standard falls every year that births fall. Demography is handing us the money to do the thing we have always said we could not afford. That window shuts when the children now in school reach working age.

6. Mimicry, and the charge that we created nothing

Naipaul wrote the most damaging sentence anyone from this region has written about it: that history is built on achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies. Most readers treat it as contempt, and Walcott, among others, answered it. But whether Naipaul felt contempt for the Caribbean is a separate question from whether his description tells us anything useful.

It does, and it sits uncomfortably close to the economics. An economy where most jobs involve distributing, installing and selling goods designed and made elsewhere is, quite literally, an economy of mimicry. It copies metropolitan consumption without the production that paid for it. Our parliaments, development plans and investment agencies are real institutions doing real work. But they manage a distribution system rather than a productive economy, which is why they can run smoothly for decades while nothing underneath changes.

Naipaul got cause and effect backwards, and Lovelace supplies the correction.

In *Is Just a Movie*, villagers are hired as extras on a foreign film shoot and paid to be shot and fall down. They want their deaths to have some style, to mean something. The production tells them it does not matter; just fall; it is just a movie. Sonnyboy refuses. He keeps getting up and dying at length, on his own terms, and they cut him from the picture for it.

That scene describes an economic arrangement more precisely than most of the literature does. We are not failing to produce. We have been cast. Someone else directs, the money goes to the producers, the part written for us is to fall down cheaply and repeatedly on cue, and how we fall is held to be of no consequence. That is comparative advantage as a role we were assigned, not an advantage we were found to have.

And Sonnyboy's refusal is the whole meaning of defiance. He is not asking for a better part. He insists on being a person in the scene rather than a unit of production within it.

"Nothing was created" is simply wrong as a description. What is missing is not creation. What is missing is any structure that turns creation into lasting capability. Naipaul mistook the absence of a structure for the absence of a people.

7. Objections

We are too small. Countries of 100,000 to 3 million people cannot build the home market that transformation requires.

The answer is not to deny the constraint. It is to point out that the tradition defended here starts from it. Demas's whole argument was that size is the binding limit and integration is the solution. The objection explains why the argument has to be regional. It does not show that it fails.

Mauritius settles the question with evidence. In 1961 Meade looked at an island where sugar was about ninety-nine per cent of exports and unemployment was near twenty per cent, and he was pessimistic. Real growth then averaged above five per cent for three decades.

Two things generalise. Mauritius built universal education *before* the industries that would need it. And when it defied its measured comparative advantage, it did so using skill built at home rather than rented from foreign firms.

Mauritian GDP per head also sits below several Caribbean countries. It has no gas, no oil, no bauxite, so it has no resource rent inflating the figure. On the measures that describe how a population actually lives, the country that looks poorer is doing better. The uncomfortable conclusion is that our higher number is not proof we are outperforming Mauritius. It measures how much we have sold.

It's governance, not structure. This paper largely accepts that objection and builds it in. The account above is mostly an account of our own institutional failure.

The disagreement is narrower than it looks. The institutionalist literature traces extractive institutions back to colonial design, so both accounts share an origin story. And the failures identified here are not random administrative weaknesses. They are the predictable survival of a colonial class structure and a colonial selection machine.

What about the success stories? Barbados's human development record and Jamaica's debt consolidation show that domestic choices matter. They do. Treating structure as destiny is both wrong and demoralising.

But Jamaica is instructive. Labour force participation of 68 per cent and record-low unemployment sit next to a Human Capital Index score of 0.53 and informal work accounting for more than half the labour force. The country is putting large numbers of people to work in an economy that never developed their capabilities and cannot pay a wage that sustains a household. High participation is not the same as using people well.

What about the territories that stayed? Cayman, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, Martinique and Guadeloupe all record higher incomes per head than most independent CARICOM states.

That partly supports the argument. They are prosperous because they kept the metropolitan relationship, which shows that prosperity in this region has historically come from outside attachment rather than from what we can produce ourselves.

The model also does not travel, and it is not free. The French départements combine high income with long-term structural unemployment, extreme import dependence and repeated social crisis. And the comparison measures income, not capability.

It is worth noting that Césaire was the rapporteur of the 1946 law that made Martinique a French department, and spent much of the rest of his career wrestling with what that delivered.

8. What we should do

Three commitments, and the measures that follow. The first six need nobody's permission.

Make human potential the goal of economic policy. Not one more indicator in the annex. The thing policy is actually for.

The word is chosen deliberately. Césaire ([1955] 1972) reduced colonisation to an equation whose key term is *chosification*: thing-ification, turning a person into an instrument of production and therefore into an object that can be owned, valued, depreciated and written off. Human capital accounting uses exactly that grammar. "Potential" refuses the grammar while keeping the arithmetic. In a region where the arithmetic was once applied to actual people, that is not a cosmetic choice.

In practice: publish a capability account at Budget, before the GDP number. It should report the national stock of human potential, exam results measured against the whole age group, labour force participation compared with each country's own historical peak, the share of jobs paying above a living wage, and how many qualified people we keep. Most of this can be built from data we already collect. Whole-cohort attainment needs nothing more than existing exam results divided by a population figure the statistics office already publishes.

Defy our measured comparative advantage, using capability we build ourselves. Prioritise the domestic and regional market for domestic and regional production, and make foreign investment conditional on a real transfer of skills and know-how.

Educate the whole cohort, not the top tenth. Abolish selection at eleven across CARICOM, following the model Barbados has adopted and the OECS already runs. Place children at 13 or 14 after continuous assessment. Build technical and vocational institutions that carry equal standing.

Alongside these: move institutional savings and bank credit into production; run a regional land audit and bring idle farmland back into use through a land tax based on how land is used; clean up the tax concession regime with expiry dates, published lists and compulsory costing; use government and state-company purchasing to guarantee demand for regional producers; widen ownership through credit unions, cooperatives and employee share schemes; and finish the CSME's Single Economy, which for the smaller countries is the smallest market in which regionally trained people can find regional work.

External reform matters too. Reparatory justice, reform of the global financial architecture and better resource governance should be pursued as a single claim. But understand what they do. They widen the room. They do not decide what gets built in it. A reparations settlement or cheaper borrowing, poured into the structures described above, would be swallowed by imports, debt service and existing property interests. The case for reparations gets stronger, not weaker, when we can show we would turn the money into capability.

One limit on all of it. We must never try to keep people by making it hard to leave. A nurse who emigrates is maximising her own lifetime earnings. Her interest and the national interest genuinely diverge, and the only legitimate tool we have is what the work pays at home. Bonded scholarships, exit taxes and compulsory service obligations do not belong in this framework. Capital is owned. Potential is not. The obligation runs from the state to the citizen, not the other way around.

9. Who decides, and how

An obvious objection to everything above deserves a direct answer.

This paper says the binding constraints are domestic interests: a merchant class that lives off imports, a tuition market that lives off selection, and political competition funded by both. Then

it proposes reforms that those same interests are well placed to block. Unless something changes in how decisions get made, the plan assumes the obstacle will kindly remove itself.

Six institutional changes follow. None needs external permission, and none is exotic. Each already exists somewhere in the Commonwealth.

Disclose political funding. If distributors and retailers pay for political competition, then the line running from import dependence to trade, tax and concession policy runs through campaign finance. The fix is disclosure thresholds, contribution limits, a public register of donors, and a body with auditing power.

This is first because nothing else on the list survives while that channel stays dark.

Create a legal tax expenditure register. Concessions are handed out at ministerial discretion, rarely costed, almost never published. Require every concession to appear in an annual statement with its revenue cost, beneficiary, justification, and expiry date. That turns an invisible giveaway into a visible budget line that has to be defended against health and education spending. Expiry should be automatic, with renewal requiring a positive decision rather than silence.

Lock commitments in at CARICOM level. Transformation needs fifteen to twenty-five years. Governments get five. The available remedy is for a government to tie its own successors' hands by lodging commitments regionally, where reversing them carries a diplomatic and legal cost rather than just a domestic political one. Treaty-level commitments on the education standard and tax-expenditure discipline, enforceable before the Caribbean Court of Justice, would do it.

This also changes what the CSME is for. It is not only a market. It is the instrument through which a Caribbean government protects a long reform from a short electoral cycle.

Set up an independent assessment and placement authority. Abolishing selection at eleven needs a placement system parents trust more than they trust the exam. Continuous assessment run by schools, with no independent body moderating it, will be read as favouritism. The people who profit from tuition will make that argument loudly and effectively. A statutory authority responsible for moderation, standards and placement, publishing both its methods and its results, is a precondition for abolition, not an implementation detail.

Set up a land commission with a title tribunal. Rent-to-own tenancies and land taxes based on use both need something most member states lack: a complete land registry, a current valuation roll, and a cheap legal route to settle family land title without throwing anyone off. A standing land commission with an attached tribunal is the form it takes. Without it, land policy stays an announcement.

Give the statistics office legal independence. A capability account the finance ministry can lean on is not an accountability tool. If the human potential stock, whole-cohort attainment and the living-wage employment share are going to displace GDP at Budget, whoever produces them

has to sit outside ministerial reach, with a fixed-term head, a protected budget, and a duty to publish on a set schedule whatever the numbers say.

Two things to notice about this list.

First, it is deliberately unexciting: registers, tribunals, moderating bodies, disclosure rules. We have repeatedly tried to transform this region through dramatic acts, nationalisation, a new ministry, and a summit declaration, but those acts were repeatedly reversed because they never changed who decided what came next.

Second, these reforms are cheap. They cost a fraction of the substantive measures they make possible, and they are the part of the programme a single administration can finish in one term.

The next section is not a detour from this argument. It is the proof. We have already run the experiment.

10. Caroni: what a deed actually takes

Trinidad and Tobago has already attempted the land redistribution proposed here, at scale. The record is the most useful evidence available to any Caribbean government thinking about it.

A note on the evidence. What follows rests on press reporting and on figures given by ministers in Parliament and at distribution ceremonies. It has not been checked against audited accounts, the court record, or a published evaluation, none of which the author has seen. The figures are reported estimates, not established facts, and several have been revised repeatedly over two decades. The argument does not depend on their precision, and the pattern is not in dispute. But they should not be repeated as findings.

When Caroni (1975) Limited closed in 2003, ending large-scale sugar cultivation in the country, land formed part of the severance package offered to its workforce. That workforce was reported at roughly 7,900 daily-paid and around 1,150 monthly-paid employees. Each was to get an agricultural plot of about two acres on a thirty-year sublease, plus a residential lot. The company's holdings are usually put at somewhere between 77,000 and 79,000 acres. Cabinet took the decision, and the Prime Minister announced it publicly in November 2003.

Four years later, according to press reporting of the judgment, Justice Deyalsingh held in judicial review proceedings brought for the workers that not one lease had yet been granted to any former sugar worker, that the government had repeatedly pushed back the handover dates, and that a public authority which creates a legitimate expectation must honour it and must do so promptly.

The state appealed. A later administration withdrew the appeal. Charges reported at between $20,000 and $30,000, which recipients had to pay before taking possession, were later cancelled and refunded. Distribution ceremonies were still being held in January 2026, against a promise by then about twenty-three years old.

Ministerial statements in late 2024 put cumulative distribution at roughly eleven thousand residential deeds and agricultural leases, with something over four thousand still outstanding. A state agency had reported the agricultural portion as about 95 per cent complete two years earlier. The two figures are not directly comparable, and that gap itself signals the record-keeping problem the case illustrates.

Five lessons follow, and each one bears on the proposals above.

The form of tenure decides whether land becomes capital. The leases were originally non-transferable. That meant recipients could not use them as security, and no bank would lend against them. A former attorney general argued at the time that the settlement required a deed of conveyance rather than a lease. The terms were later changed to allow transfer and inheritance.

This is the single most important design point for any rent-to-own scheme. A tenancy that never ends in registered, transferable freehold leaves the recipient landed on paper and landless in practice. It recreates by administration exactly what family land creates by inheritance: occupation without collateral.

Land without the skills to use it produces idle land. By 2021 the responsible minister was publicly worried that a large majority of recipients were not using the land as intended. Press commentary put the figure at around 85 per cent, though this appears to be a ministerial characterisation rather than a published survey. Whatever the true number, the direction is not seriously contested, and it is not the recipients' fault.

No skills bank profiling the former workers was ever built. Irrigation went in patchily and without a plan. A 2003 UWI study of what the estate lands could grow never took place. Men and women whose entire working lives had been organised around one crop inside a vertically integrated company were handed two acres and expected to become independent commercial farmers.

Land reform is industrial policy, or it is a subdivision exercise. Extension services, irrigation, storage and processing capacity, and guaranteed purchase have to be built alongside the transfer, not left to turn up afterwards.

Speed is part of the design, not an administrative detail. Somebody who waits ten years or more for title does not plant tree crops, install irrigation, or borrow against the land, because none of that makes sense without security. Delay does not just postpone the benefit. It changes what the recipient does, and that behaviour then gets read as evidence the whole transfer was a mistake. Any scheme should set a legal deadline for issuing title and make missing it actionable.

The courts worked, and that is the institutional finding. Litigation moved the process. Legitimate expectation was the doctrine that moved it.

This directly supports the previous section. Commitments you can sue over get honoured. Commitments that rest on ministerial goodwill get postponed from one administration to the

next. Statutory deadlines, a title tribunal, and, for regional commitments, the Caribbean Court of Justice are what turn a policy into an entitlement.

A land settlement run as severance is not land reform. The Caroni transfer was structured as compensation for job loss and accounted for that way. At a distribution ceremony in 2017 the responsible minister put the eventual total cost of the package at some $18 billion, of which around $10 billion related to land. Those are ministerial figures, not audited ones, and should be read as orders of magnitude.

Read as severance, even the lower figure is an enormous sum for a poor result. Read as agricultural development spending, the programme was never designed that way. There was no production target, no plan to link the land to processing, and no monitoring of whether any of it entered cultivation.

The same acreage, transferred under a rent-to-own tenancy conditional on productive use, with extension support and a purchase guarantee attached, would have been a national agricultural programme. Instead it was a political settlement that happened to involve land.

So the wider proposal in this paper needs tighter specification than the earlier discussion suggests. Rent-to-own tenancies should carry a legal maximum period before freehold. Title should be registrable and transferable on completion. The productive-use condition has to come with the services that make productive use possible. And the whole thing should sit under a land commission with a tribunal that can compel issuance.

Trinidad and Tobago has already paid for this lesson. The rest of the region can have it free.

11. What we would get back

People resist a programme like this because it is expensive and slow. That has it backwards. Each part pays for itself through a channel we currently treat as fixed.

Transfers and subsidies. Half the central government budget in Trinidad and Tobago goes on transfers and subsidies, and the share is comparable elsewhere. The standard response calls this indiscipline and proposes cuts.

But the transfer bill is the price of an economy where most work does not pay enough to run a household. Cut it without changing that, and you have not balanced the budget. You have pushed families into hardship and guaranteed a reversal at the next election, which is why every consolidation in our history has been partly undone.

Raise what workers can produce, and the transfer bill falls permanently, because the wage does the job the transfer was doing. Building capability is therefore the highest-return budget consolidation tool a Caribbean government has. It just works on a timescale longer than an electoral term, which argues for cross-party agreements and legal protection, not against doing it.

Debt. The same logic runs through the debt position. Consolidations built on years of primary surpluses squeeze exactly the public investment that would grow the productive base, so the ratio improves while our ability to service the debt does not. An economy that makes more of what it uses needs less foreign exchange, borrows less to cover the gap, and pays what it owes out of a growing base rather than a static one. Debt sustainability in the Caribbean is not mainly a question of fiscal rules. It is a question of what we make.

Climate risk. We currently treat climate exposure as a financing problem. A hurricane destroys several times annual output; we borrow to rebuild, and the debt leaves us less able to prepare for the next one. Climate-resilient debt clauses and parametric insurance are genuine gains and should be pursued.

But an economy that imports its food, building materials, energy, and technical labour has turned every storm into a foreign exchange crisis as well as a physical one. Regional food production, locally made building materials, renewable power and a resident engineering and maintenance workforce are climate adaptation measures, not just industrial policy. Resilience is a question of what we can supply ourselves when the ships are late.

The credit system. Reorganising domestic credit is the least discussed of these and the easiest to do. We do not lack savings. Pension funds, national insurance, credit unions and insurers hold assets that are large relative to GDP. What we lack are the institutions to route them into production.

Three changes would start it. First, rewrite the investment rules for pension, insurance and national insurance funds so that a defined share must go to productive domestic and regional enterprise. Second, capitalise regional growth and venture funds to handle that money, because prudential rules written for capital preservation will otherwise keep it parked in government paper. Third, deliberately shift what banks lend for, so that finance for manufacturing, agro-processing and technical services stops being a fraction of finance for imported cars and debt consolidation.

Credit unions deserve particular attention. They are our most successful cooperative institutions, and they are almost entirely limited to consumer lending. Moving them into enterprise finance would put production credit in the hands of institutions ordinary people already own.

Land, and rent-to-own. Emancipation freed the labour and left the land, and we have never fixed it. But redistribution does not have to mean taking property from anyone, and rent-to-own best fits our circumstances.

The state leases idle estate land to working farmers and cooperatives on long tenancies. Rent payments count towards eventual freehold, conditional on the land being used. The tenant gets security immediately, which makes it rational to invest in soil, irrigation, and tree crops. Title transfers once the conditions are met. And the state turns dead acreage into production without a large cash outlay or a constitutional fight over property rights.

Pair it with a land tax based on use, which makes holding land idle expensive, and a legal route to settle family land title without dispossession. Together these address the two things keeping Caribbean smallholders out of commercial farming: they cannot get land, and what they do hold cannot be used as collateral.

The previous section sets out, from our own experience, what makes such a scheme work or fail.

12. Conclusion

The independence generation achieved something real. Formal colonial rule ended. Everyone got the vote. Education expanded. A Caribbean personality asserted itself in the world.

The argument here is not that independence failed. It is that independence was left incomplete by design, and that we have become better at explaining the incompleteness than at fixing it.

Consider what we do. We lend our own institutional savings to our own governments to pay for imported consumption. We finance motor cars more readily than factories. We import food while farmland sits idle. We give away tax concessions we never cost, then borrow abroad to replace the money. We sort our children at eleven into a hierarchy designed in the 1800s, and then wonder why investors cannot find a workforce.

A region that does all that is not mainly being held back by Brussels or Washington. It is being held back by an arrangement of domestic interests that the colonial period created and that we have preserved ever since.

That arrangement will not dissolve just because someone has described it. It is held in place by machinery: political funding nobody discloses, concessions nobody costs, electoral horizons shorter than any transformation, and statistics that report whatever is convenient. Which is why the institutional reforms above are not warm-up exercises. They are the first instalment of the programme, and the part we can finish in a single term.

We know how to raise GDP here. Find the gas and sell it. Sell the bauxite. Sell the beach. Spend the proceeds. We have done it with one commodity after another, and each cycle has left a smaller resource base, a bigger transfer bill, and a workforce whose capability has barely changed. The number went up. The people did not, and a great many of them left.

That is what our founding critics were saying, and it is why they were banned rather than answered. James argued that the party state was reproducing colonial relations under national management. Rodney (1972) argued that underdevelopment was a relationship rather than a stage, and took the argument directly to working people instead of keeping it in the university. Carmichael argued that political representation without economic control is symbolic. None of the three was mainly talking to Europe. All three were telling Caribbean societies something about themselves.

It is worth being explicit about who else has been doing that work, because this paper has leaned on them throughout and nobody counts them as economists.

James, in *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), showed what this region does with an inherited form when given the chance. We took the colonisers' game, mastered it, and made it carry an assertion of ourselves its inventors never intended. He asked what they know of cricket, who only cricket know. The same capacity applied to production instead of sport is the entire content of the transformation argued for here.

Lamming saw that the villagers' security was occupation without title, long before land tenure reached any policy agenda, and understood that the categories a people are taught to explain their own subordination outlast any treaty.

Lovelace saw that Calvary Hill was not short of capability, discipline or invention, only of any structure that would use them. And in Sonnyboy he gave us the difference between asking for a better part and refusing to be an extra in someone else's production.

Naipaul, from the other direction, forced the question of whether anything here was created at all, and we have been answering him ever since.

These are not decorations on an economic argument. They are the analysis, arrived at first, and in a form people actually read.

That carries a policy implication we have never taken seriously. A society that does not tell its own story will be described by whoever is selling something: as a beach, a tax jurisdiction, a set of arrival figures, a risk rating. The apparatus that produces our own account of ourselves is not an ornament on the development strategy. It is the part of the economy that decides whether our people can imagine any arrangement other than the one they have.

Supporting writers, publishers, film, music, theatre and the archives that hold them is serious industrial policy in a region whose cultural exports already travel further than its manufactures. It is also a serious political investment in a society whose central problem is that a colonial arrangement still looks to many people like the natural order of things. Fund it properly, and stop treating it as festival money.

Sixty years on, the questions sit where they were left. Who governs is settled. Who owns, who benefits, and who takes part in shaping national development are not. And they will not be settled anywhere but here, by us.

We took the flag. The deed is still outstanding.

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