

From Emancipation to Jubilee

1888 to 2026:

Healing the Self and the Nation



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I have encountered many brilliant Trinbagonians of African heritage in my 64 years. They have all affected my life in many ways from the panyard of Modern Symphony Steel Orchestra in Five Rivers Arouca playing six bass to the hangars at Piarco and the village playgrounds, but two exceptional men at UTT necessitate special recognition.

Professors Kenneth S. Julien (Emeritus), T.C., and Selwyn R. Cudjoe, O.R.T.T., both sons of the soil from Arouca and Tacarigua, respectively. Both recognised by the state for their contributions to society.

Professor Julien for his nonpartisan approach to education and the establishment of UTT and Professor Cudjoe for his unique overarching perspective on the history of the African in the new world and its impact on his position in society that he has taken into UTT. Three hundred years of our history will now be part of curricula at the national university.

At the behest of Professor Cudjoe for a celebration of Emancipation 2026 on July 29, The University of Trinidad and Tobago reprinted Reverend Philip Henry Douglin's *Jubilee of Emancipation* address, first published in the *San Fernando Gazette* on August 11, 1888, fifty years after the abolition of slavery.

At a meeting of senior staff two days before the event, each person was given a copy of this reprint. It was only the second time I encountered the name Douglin or his address, the first being at the launch of Professor Cudjoe's Library Corner, and in reading, the profoundness of his message sunk deep and connects with much of the issues in our society today. Douglin's message to the people of Trinidad in 1888 was not merely one of celebration, it was a charge.

Reading the message in 2026, the resonance is unsettling. As I understand the message, Douglin identified three main challenges for a free people: the elimination of self-degradation, the realisation

of the power of the mind, and the securing of a dignified place within a multiracial society.

These still remain as deficits for a large segment of our society today. Until we confront them, we will continue to grapple with corrosive outcomes, namely, entrenched political acrimony, social segregation, and the recruitment of our young men, particularly of African descent, into criminal gangs and other unproductive systems that weaken the national fabric.

Douglin's sermon carries with it, among many strong guidelines, a command: "Never, never be ashamed of your origin." He understood that slavery's most enduring legacy was not in chains, but in the mind. For hundreds of years, colonial ideology sought to convince the African that he was inferior. The danger, Douglin warned, was that we would internalise that lie.

We see evidence of that internalisation in 2026. It appears in the devaluing of our history, in colourism, in the rejection of our dialects, and most tragically, in the willingness of some of our youth to find identity and status in gangs rather than in being constructive citizens.

Douglin's offered remedy was education and self-growth. "Cultivate your minds," he urged. "Fit yourself for, and make yourselves worthy of, the highest offices." Many have done so, but many more people need to be motivated in this direction.

For us today, this requires a deliberate national project. Our curriculum must teach the full arc of our people's contribution to our national development — from resistance and rebellion to nation-building. UTT, under Professor Cudjoe, has commenced this effort. It requires mentorship and visible role models in our communities, from Arouca to Laventille to Point Fortin. A young man or woman who understands the intellectual and moral legacy of their ancestors is far less likely to surrender a future to a life of crime.

Douglin shifts his concern to the value of unity when he chides, "It would have been greater still," he lamented, "if there had been more unity of effort ... if we did not turn our power against ourselves by our endless jealousies and rivalries."

This hits home with the state of our political

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discourse in 2026. Our politics has become increasingly tribal and acrimonious. We organise ourselves along racial and partisan lines, and in doing so, we overshadow substantive issues like employment, education, and crime prevention.

This division serves no one except those who benefit from a distracted and fractured people. Douglin, however, did not seek the loss of identity. He called for a multiplicity of loyalties: “Be at peace with all men. Be loyal to your Sovereign, to your country, to the laws, to your race, to religion.” In other words, be proudly Trinbagonian. The path forward demands that we elevate “our worth” above party and race.

We must demand policy-based political discourse. We must also build or strengthen coalitions across ethnic lines at the community level. When citizens of different backgrounds collaborate to establish a business incubator, vocational training, or a violence-prevention programme in a vulnerable area at existing community centres, we directly counter the forces of segregation.

Perhaps the most advanced aspect of Douglin’s address was his connection of economic and positional status. He understood that political freedom without economic opportunity would be an incomplete mission.

The pipeline from school-leaving to gang involvement is, at its core, an economic one. Where legitimate opportunity is absent, illegal systems will emerge to fill the void. The cost to the nation is immense, in lost lives, in security expenditure, and in the erosion of social and institutional trust.

Douglin proposed, among others, a quadratic approach that remains relevant today: Focusing on education, industry, individual morality, and unity.

A modern education must be practical and aspirational. We are seeing expanded focus and investment in technical and vocational training from this current administration: with digital skills development, bursaries and national internships that can lead directly to employment. This is what “graduate mobility” looks like in practice. The various boards at state institutions should be mandated to include in their strategic plans, youth

educational engagement as a national priority.

Our industries must trend towards decentralisation. The government, private sector, and civil society must prioritise entrepreneurship and niche market development within the very communities that are most at risk. Legal economic activity must be made as accessible and rewarding as a replacement for illegal ones. Laventille rhythm and Moruga Pepper can be global attractions.

The moral fabric and purpose of a society cannot be legislated, but they can be nurtured. Faith-based organisations, NGOs, and community elders have a critical role in providing mentorship, counselling, and a sense of meaning. Douglin’s call to have “the fear of God before your eyes” was a call to anchor oneself in something larger than immediate gratification.

Some level of achievement of unity is the prerequisite to achieving any of these. No single group can solve this alone. It will require sustained collaboration between the state, the private sector, and civil society.

Douglin closed his 1888 address with a hymn and a prayer: “Grand Lord that all our future may work out good begun; that in all the tasks that wait us, the goal at last be won.”

The “good begun” was Emancipation in 1838 after the end of the apprenticeship period. The “goal” was full and equal citizenship. We in Trinidad and Tobago, marked a milestone when Emancipation Day was recognised as a public holiday in 1985, but the deeper work remains.

As we observe Emancipation 2026, let us recommit to Douglin’s mandate. His final words was “Worth makes the man. The want of it the fellow.”

Our national worth will not be determined by our divisions or our differences, but by our collective character, intellect, and the will to build a safe harmonious society.

The chains of 1838 were broken by the law of the former slave master. The chains of 2026 — acrimony and division — must be broken by us. Let this be the year we take up Reverend Douglin’s blueprint and advance, together, forward ever, only looking backward for ancestral guidance.