

## **Kevin Greenidge: Public service, purpose, and national transformation**

Remarks by Dr Kevin Greenidge, Governor of the Central Bank of Barbados, at the National Union of Public Workers Founders Day Lecture, Bridgetown, 26 January 2026.

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### *Presentation accompanying the speech*

Good afternoon,

It is a distinct honour to deliver this Founders Day Lecture of the National Union of Public Workers. I stand here today as Governor of the Central Bank of Barbados, but also as a public servant, and as someone who has witnessed how organised labour, and particularly this Union, has played a critical role in our nation's stability and social progress.

Founders Day is not just a moment to look back. It is a moment to take stock. It asks us to honour legacy, and to renew purpose. It asks us to remember that institutions do not sustain themselves, they are sustained by people, by culture, and by choices. And I want to use this occasion to talk about one idea that has repeatedly helped Barbados through difficult moments: partnership.

Not partnership as ceremony. Not partnership as a press release. Partnership as a discipline, a way of working that allows a country to face hard truths, make hard decisions, and still hold together as a society.

My theme is Public Service, Purpose, and National Transformation. And the argument I want to make today is simple: Barbados stabilized, recovered and grow because we chose national ownership and partnership, and because the public service delivered.

I will move through five parts. First, what the NUPW built, and why it matters beyond the workplace. Second, the Social Partnership as a Barbadian tool for stability, including the lessons of the 1990s. Third, the BERT journey since 2018, why it had to happen, and what it achieved. Fourth, what BERT 2026, the third phase, demands now, especially on productivity and delivery. Fifth, a direct call to action, to public servants, to the Union, and to all social partners.

If you remember one line from me today, let it be this: Partnership matters - *BERT is a homegrown Barbadian program, successful because it is supported by international partners, and powered by public service and partnership.*

### **Becoming a National Institution: What the NUPW Built**

The history of the National Union of Public Workers is inseparable from the story of modern Barbados. On January 22, 1944, a small group of civil servants gathered to

form what was then called the Barbados Civil Service Association. This was no small act of courage in a colonial society where public officers had little voice, and where many viewed the very notion of organised labour in the civil service with suspicion.

Yet those founders understood something that still matters now: dignity in work, fairness in employment, and voice in governance are not privileges handed out by somebody else, they are rights to be claimed, defended, and protected.

The Association was formally registered as a trade union in 1964, and in 1971 it became the National Union of Public Workers, signalling a broadened vision that embraced public sector workers more widely, in service to the nation.

From the beginning, the Union's objectives were clear: to organise public workers, improve pay and conditions, and promote the economic, social, and cultural wellbeing of members. But those objectives were never only about wages. They were about dignity, equity, and the professionalisation of public service.

That is why I describe the NUPW as a national institution. Because at its best, the Union has protected workers while also helping Barbados protect the integrity of its public service. And that brings me to a point I want to make early, because it frames everything else. A strong union does not only protect workers. A strong union also lifts standards, builds capability, and supports stability, because workers thrive best in a country that is credible, stable, and growing.

That is not ideology, that is reality. An unstable country becomes an unfair country. An unstable country squeezes wages, squeezes services, and forces painful choices. So, when this Union helps Barbados stay stable and coherent, it is also helping its members, not only today, but for the long run. And we see that nation-building role in what the Union has built beyond bargaining.

The Public Workers' Academy, established in 1985, was a signal that representation must be paired with education, and that advocacy must include equipping workers with knowledge, skills, and leadership capacity. And the Barbados Public Workers' Co-operative Credit Union reflects another deep understanding: that economic security and professional empowerment go together, and that financially resilient workers are better positioned to serve the nation effectively. Those are not small achievements. That is purpose in action.

## **Partnership as a Barbadian Advantage: The Social Partnership and the 1990s Lesson**

Let me turn to the Social Partnership, because it is one of Barbados' greatest institutional advantages, and the NUPW has been central to it. I am not going to romanticise partnership. Partnership involves tension. It involves hard bargaining. It involves moments where trust is low and fatigue is high. But partnership provides something priceless: a legitimate space to manage trade-offs in the open, so that adjustment does not become social rupture.

In the early 1990s, Barbados faced a grave economic crisis. The country stood at a crossroads between confrontation and cooperation. And in August 1993, Government,

employers, and workers' representatives negotiated Protocol I of the Social Partnership, a prices and incomes protocol that linked stabilisation to productivity and employment security. In plain language, it was a national agreement that said: we will make sacrifices, but we will do it in a structured way, with dialogue, with fairness, and with a commitment to keep the country working.

And the NUPW's participation was critical. Public officers accepted sacrifices within a negotiated framework that respected workers' voice and dignity. That did not signal weakness. It reflected strategic wisdom, and it helped protect the wider economy, restore confidence, and maintain social cohesion. It also established a model that evolved, with successive protocols and continued dialogue.

Now here is the point I want to draw out, because it matters for BERT and for the future. The Social Partnership is not only about peace. It is about performance. It was created to help Barbados safeguard stability, protect the currency peg, improve competitiveness, raise productivity, and keep society coherent while hard measures were taken. So, when we talk about partnership today, we should treat it as a tool of national delivery. And the reason I am spending time on the 1990s is because Barbados faced a similar choice again in 2018. We could either fight each other, or we could face reality together.

## **The 2018 Choice Point: Why BERT Had to Happen**

Barbados chose to face reality together. Debt levels were unsustainable, reserves were dangerously low, confidence had weakened, and the room to protect social services was shrinking.

When reserves are low, that is not an academic statistic. Low reserves mean vulnerability. They mean pressure on the exchange rate peg. They mean import capacity becomes fragile. They mean fear spreads quickly through households and businesses. High debt is not just a ratio. High debt crowds out public services, raises risk, and reduces national freedom of action. And when credibility falls, everything becomes harder, wages, investment, services, planning for the future.

So, 2018 was a choice point. We could manage decline politely, or we could decide to stabilise, restructure, and rebuild credibility.

BERT was that decision. And I want to say this carefully, because the framing matters, especially for a union audience. BERT was a homegrown Barbadian programme. It was designed by Barbadians. It was implemented by Barbadian institutions. It was carried by Barbadians.

We secured international support, including financing facilities and technical assistance from the IMF and other partners, and those partners reviewed progress. But that support did not replace national ownership. External support helped strengthen confidence, it helped mobilise financing, and it helped validate our path to the wider world.

But it did not do the work. The work was done here, in ministries, departments, statutory bodies, and state-owned enterprises. And it was done while trying to protect the

vulnerable and preserve essential services. That is where partnership becomes practical, not philosophical. Because adjustment without partnership becomes punishment. Reform without partnership becomes brittle. And policy without partnership becomes theatre.

## **What BERT Delivered: The Outcomes and What They Really Mean**

Now let's talk about outcomes, because partnership is not a substitute for results. Partnership has to produce. Let me now summarise the progress in a way that is clear and measurable. Public debt to GDP has fallen sharply, from 178.9 percent to 101.1 percent by end-September 2025. Reserves have rebounded from under four weeks of import cover to 31.6 weeks by end-September 2025, with international reserves at \$3.3 billion. The economy expanded for 17 quarters since the pandemic through September 2025. And Barbados returned to the international capital markets in 2025 with a US\$500 million bond issuance.

Those are serious achievements. Not because they look good on paper, but because they translate into real national benefits. They translate into stronger protection for the exchange rate peg. They translate into lower vulnerability to shocks. They translate into more room to maintain social services. They translate into the return of confidence, and confidence is the oxygen of investment and job creation.

And let me also note something that matters even more to every Barbadian household. Employment strengthened with recovery and growth. Unemployment fell to 6.1 percent by June 2025, the lowest on record, and net job creation surpassed 10,200 in the 12 months ending September 2025.

Again, the point of these numbers is not to boast. It is to make a simple point: execution matters. Consistency matters. Credibility matters.

And none of these outcomes happened by accident. They were earned. Earned by policy discipline, yes. But also earned by implementation, month after month, across the public service. So, when we tell the BERT story, we must be honest about the delivery mechanism. The public service delivered the daily mechanics of stability. And organised labour helped the country hold together while those mechanics were being rebuilt. That is why partnership is not optional. It is structural.

## **The Public Service as the Engine of Delivery: What "Implementation" Really Means**

Policy can be announced in 10 minutes. Delivery takes years. Delivery is not slogans. Delivery is budgeting and controls. Delivery is procurement and value for money. Delivery is accurate reporting and transparency. Delivery is tax and customs administration. Delivery is SOEs oversight. Delivery is data, systems, and workflows that actually work. Delivery is public communication that prevents fear and rumours from becoming self-fulfilling crises.

So, if we are serious about transformation, we have to talk seriously about public administration.

Let me describe the BERT delivery challenge in three layers.

First, credibility through discipline. BERT restored fiscal control and maintained strong primary balances over time to place debt on a sustainable path. That consistency mattered, because it helped rebuild trust. And trust lowers risk. Lower risk helps unlock financing. Financing helps support investment. Investment supports jobs and opportunities.

Second, structural fixes, not short-term cuts. BERT was not only about closing a fiscal gap. It also involved changing how government works, especially in oversight and governance. Several reforms that were implemented across the years, reforms that improved trade facilitation and business processes, strengthened revenue systems, and tightened oversight of SOEs through standardised reporting, dashboards, and more rigorous monitoring.

Third, trust through transparency and monitoring. Great emphasis was placed on implementation arrangements and oversight, including high-level oversight, technical coordination, and transparent monitoring. It also explicitly placed the Social Partnership among the monitoring and accountability mechanisms that help keep the programme grounded in society, not floating above it.

This is the model. A country cannot reform in silence. A country reforms best when there are ownership, transparency, and structured engagement.

Now I want to say something that might be uncomfortable, but it is necessary. Public service excellence is not only about commitment, it is also about standards. If we normalise slow systems, unclear procedures, and inconsistent service, we pay for it as a country. We pay for it in lower competitiveness. We pay for it in citizen frustration. We pay for it in the loss of trust. And we pay for it in the end with lower growth and tighter fiscal space.

So, partnership in this next phase must become partnership for performance. Not partnership as comfort. Partnership as delivery.

## **The IMF's Role: Supportive and Validating, but Not the Story**

Let me address the IMF question directly, because it is always in the background.

Barbados used international financing support, including IMF facilities, to support BERT, especially in the period of stabilisation and in the period of shocks. That support mattered because it provided financing support and technical assistance. It mattered because it helped validate the programme to investors and other partners. And regular reviews created an external discipline that reinforced credibility.

But it is essential to keep the framing correct: The facilities supported the plan, they did not author the plan. Barbados owned the strategy. Barbados made the trade-offs. Barbados implemented the reforms. And it is not just us saying that. IMF and rating agencies communications over the years repeatedly recognised BERT as homegrown and consistently pointed to strong implementation.

So when we speak to Barbadians, and especially when we speak to public workers, we should not give away authorship of our own work. The story is Barbados' work, Barbados' partnership, Barbados' delivery, supported by international partners.

## **The Hard Truth: Stability is Not the Destination**

Now I want to be candid, because Founders Day is not the time for propaganda. Stability is not prosperity. Stability is a platform. It is the floor, not the ceiling. You can reduce debt and still have weak productivity. You can rebuild reserves and still have frustrations in service delivery. You can restore credibility and still have households feeling squeezed if growth does not become more broad-based and more sustainable. So, the end of one phase is not the end of the work.

The next phase is harder in some ways, because it is less dramatic. It is not the drama of immediate crisis. It is the discipline of daily improvement. And that is exactly what BERT 2026 is designed to address.

BERT 2026 says plainly: Barbados has restored credibility and created space for investment, but significant challenges remain. Productivity is still weak. Investment gaps persist. Climate risk remains a serious threat. Contingent liabilities, including those related to state-owned enterprises and major projects, must be managed carefully. And external volatility can return quickly in a small, open economy. So, the next phase is not just about stability and growth. It is about becoming high-performing. That is national transformation.

## **BERT 2026: The Shift to Productivity and Delivery**

BERT 2026 is the third and perhaps the most ambitious phase in the country's reform journey. It builds on stabilisation, builds on growth momentum, and now shifts decisively toward transformation. It sets out a vision to transform Barbados into a high-performing, inclusive, and climate-resilient economy.

It is organised around five pillars: Productivity and Competitiveness. Debt and Fiscal Sustainability. Financial Market Deepening. Climate Resilience and the Green Economy. Human Capital and Inclusion.

Now I want to focus on the first pillar, productivity, because this is where public service and organised labour become decisive.

Labour productivity growth has averaged about 0.8 percent per year since 2018. That is not enough. And it is not enough in a way that matters to public workers directly. Weak productivity means limited room for sustained wage growth. It means more frustration, because inefficiency creates stress. And it means weaker service delivery, because the system spends too much time on avoidable friction.

So, BERT 2026 puts productivity at the centre, and it frames it in a way that I think unions should welcome. It says productivity is not only technology and regulation, it is also a healthy and resilient workforce. It notes rising illness and absenteeism, and it

points to NISS sickness benefits of \$21 million in six months. That is a signal that the country has to take workforce health seriously as an economic issue and a human issue.

And then it goes further, into delivery. BERT 2026 commits to building what it describes as an interoperable Digital Productivity State: once-only data principles, shared registries, automated licensing and permits, and digital payments.

This is not digitising forms for the sake of it. This is redesigning how government works so that citizens spend less time stuck, and public officers spend less time trapped in repetitive manual tasks.

And it sets out specific delivery reforms: Full operationalisation of the Barbados Electronic Single Window to reduce trade friction. Expansion of the Trusted Trader Programme and digitisation of customs and logistics. The Single Digital ID and Business Identity System to underpin interoperability and reduce fraud. Modernisation of Business Barbados into a single digital platform for registration, payments, and verification.

And because BERT 2026 is honest about capacity constraints, it proposes a small, empowered Productivity Delivery Unit to drive end-to-end process redesign, automation, and KPI reporting across high-friction areas like permits, customs clearance, construction approvals, company registration, and work permits.

Let me underline the philosophy behind this, because it matters for labour-management relations. This is not about working harder. This is about working smarter. It is about reducing bureaucratic friction that burdens citizens and burdens public officers. It is about freeing skilled staff to focus on higher-value work that requires judgement, problem-solving, and professionalism.

If we do this right, productivity becomes pro-worker. Better tools, clearer processes, less repetition, fewer backlogs, and more pride in service.

## **What Partnership Must Look Like Now: Partnership for Delivery**

So, what does all of this mean for partnership in the BERT 2026 era?

In the stabilization and growth phases, partnership helped the country manage sacrifice and maintain cohesion. In the transformation phase, partnership must help the country raise performance. And this is where I want to speak directly to three groups: the public service, the Union, and national leadership.

First, to the public service. Excellence must become a personal and professional standard. Excellence is not perfection. Excellence is the commitment to continuous improvement, ethical conduct, and putting the national interest above personal convenience. Whether you work in a ministry, a statutory corporation, a service department, or a state-owned enterprise, you are a nation-builder. Your work matters. Your professionalism matters. Your integrity matters. Invest in your own development. Embrace training. Embrace technology. Be curious enough to understand not only your task, but how your role fits into national outcomes.

Second, to the Union. The NUPW's legacy includes courage in 1944, dialogue over division in the 1990s, and constructive engagement through crisis periods. That is a proud tradition, and it is needed now. Continue to advocate fiercely for your members: fair compensation, secure employment, professional development, dignity in work. But also continue to recognise that worker welfare and national progress are not competing objectives. They are interdependent. A strong economy creates space for improved conditions. Productive, motivated public servants enable better governance and social progress.

In this new phase, I want to suggest a practical evolution in how we think about partnership. We should move toward a partnership that defends rights and drives results. A partnership that can negotiate fairness and still insist on service standards. A partnership that can protect workers and still support modernisation. A partnership that treats productivity not as a threat, but as a national project that must be designed with workers, not imposed on workers.

Third, to national leadership, including management across the public sector. Partnership is a two-way commitment, and I want to acknowledge that many of the right principles are already being embraced and advanced: modernising systems, strengthening accountability, improving transparency, and focusing on service delivery. The opportunity now is to sustain and deepen that work, so that every public officer has the tools, training, and clear processes needed to deliver at a higher standard.

BERT 2026 is a programme for transformation, and its success lies in consistent delivery discipline: clear priorities, realistic timelines, published service standards, transparent reporting, and fair performance management. That is what a high-performing state looks like, and it is achievable if we keep pushing together.

## **A Public Sector Example: Excellence and Modernisation at the Central Bank**

As we reflect on public service, purpose, and national transformation, let me briefly ground this in the institution I lead, the Central Bank of Barbados.

The Central Bank's mandate, maintaining the 2-to-1 exchange rate peg and promoting financial stability, affects every Barbadian, every day. During the BERT period, the Bank played a key role in supporting national recovery through policy work, debt operations, and monitoring, helping to rebuild reserves from critically low levels to over \$3 billion and restore confidence in the macroeconomic framework. This was public service at its highest standard: technical, professional, and focused on the national interest.

Excellence, however, also requires innovation and engagement. Initiatives such as BiMPay, our national instant payments system, aim to deliver secure, low-cost, real-time digital payments that improve efficiency, inclusion, and everyday economic activity. At the same time, the Bank has invested in clear communication through publications, public engagement, and financial literacy, recognising that trust grows when people understand how policy decisions affect their lives.

I offer this example to make one point: public sector excellence is not only about fulfilling a mandate. It is about delivering competently, innovating responsibly, and engaging the public in ways that build trust and support national transformation.

## **Legacy, Dignity, and the Future Worth Defending**

Let me close where Founders Day rightly takes us: legacy and responsibility.

82 years ago, a small group of civil servants gathered around a simple but profound idea: public workers deserve dignity, voice, and fair treatment. That idea became an association. That association became a union. That union became a pillar of stability and social partnership.

The values that guided those founders remain our guide today: dignity, fairness, professionalism, and service to nation. Public service in Barbados is more than employment. It is purposeful work carried out in the national interest.

But confidence must not become complacency. The work is not done. Climate adaptation, digital transformation, fiscal sustainability, inclusive growth, these demands require our best efforts.

BERT 2026 is not simply a reform plan. It is a national strategy for transformation. And it will only succeed if public service and partnership evolve into an even stronger engine for delivery.

So, I end with a simple message. Partnership helped Barbados stabilise. Partnership must now help Barbados deliver. And the public service, supported by a strong and constructive labour movement, must lead that transformation.

Thank you, and belated happy Founders Day to the National Union of Public Workers.