



Office of
the Prime Minister

**COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY
HON. PHILIP DAVIS, QC, MP
PRIME MINISTER OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS
TO THE 2022 GRADUATING CLASS
OF
MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY**

SATURDAY MAY 7TH, 2022

Mr. President,
Members of Faculty and Other Distinguished Guests,
And the Graduating Class of 2022:

Good morning!

Having travelled almost 1,000 miles to be here, I am thrilled to join you today in saying: "I Am True Blue"!

It is such an honour to be with you on this very special day, a day which marks the end of one chapter for you, and the beginning of another.

Now you may be hoping, or – let's be honest -- possibly fearing, that I'm going to stand up here and offer you a lot of advice.

Don't get me wrong – it's tempting to do so. After all, you're embarking on your careers, and I – well, let's just say it's been several years since my early 20's.

However, as the father of six, I'm acutely aware that telling you about the mistakes I made isn't going to save you from making your own. And that's OK, because it's your mistakes that will propel you forward, especially the painful ones, when you must get up off the floor, dust yourself off, dig deep inside and confront what you're really made of. In those moments, you will rely on and trust your core values, not advice from a commencement speaker.

I know you've learned already – that the stories of those who came before you can be critically important in shaping your understanding of the world, and your place in it, but the work of finding the way forward still belongs to you.

As a 19th-century Danish philosopher observed: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."

In my conversations with some of you, I've realized that we have much more in common at this moment than you might imagine:

Many of you are about to start new jobs – and I just started a new job too, seven or so months ago, when my party won the general elections in The Bahamas, and I became the Prime Minister.

And just like you, I am confronting challenges that seem to grow more complex by the day.

Your world will be shaped by climate change. There will be nowhere to hide – every state in this great country will feel the impact, one way or another, in the years to come. That is true in my country, too, where hurricanes made more intense by rising ocean temperatures have devastated our beautiful islands, leaving tragedy and destruction in their wake. Maybe previous graduates of your university, or previous governments in my country, could postpone confronting the scale of the crisis. But

none of us here today have the luxury of pretending this is someone else's problem to solve.

We are seeing, too, you and I, that a war half a world away can impact our everyday lives. Conflict in Eastern Europe means higher prices for all of us, a new shape to the energy landscape, and an outcome that will affect geopolitics in ways we can imagine and ways we cannot.

I know many of you studied finance, and media, and technology – these are all fields experiencing dizzying changes. What you know now may well be out of date in a few short years. That's intimidating, yes, but it's also exciting. It means that the most valuable knowledge you gained here is the importance of keeping your mind open, and thinking critically, but none of us can afford to grow complacent, we must keep learning.

You might know The Bahamas for our beautiful beaches, but financial services have been a very important industry for us, too. Just last month, we issued a new government policy for digital assets, and welcomed some of the brightest minds in crypto to our country, because we're ready to leverage our experience in the more traditional world of finance to create a new generation of blockchain entrepreneurs.

I know some of you who may have had a more traditional path in mind when you started university are now excited about the possibilities in fintech, NFTs, web3 and DeFi.

Being at the dawn of an exciting new era of innovation means being aware of both the threats and the possibilities. My country is proceeding with both caution and enthusiasm, and just like many of you, we're determined to turn these big changes into big opportunities.

The goals and aspirations of the citizens of a small country like The Bahamas have changed dramatically over the years, especially during the past 50 years during which we have been an independent, sovereign, nation.

Take the winner of this year's President's Award, Winton Cooper. He's a senior majoring in Environmental Sciences, and I understand he has been a respected and effective student leader during his tenure at MTSU. I hope you don't mind that I am delighted to say he is also a Bahamian!

In fact, The Bahamas has sent many students to MTSU.

One of our country's distinguished foreign ambassadors, our Ambassador to CARICOM, the Caribbean community of nations, is a proud MTSU graduate; Leslia Miller-Brice ran track here and she sends her love and warmest congratulations to you all.

Then, of course, there's Dr. Sidney McPhee. By any account, your President has had a tremendous impact in shaping this university into the great institution it is today.

I thank him for his generous welcome in inviting me to be a part of this commencement and salute his great achievements. As I said to him yesterday, even though he is making a world-changing contribution here, we still regard him as a member of our Bahamian family.

President McPhee and Ambassador Miller-Brice and Mr. Cooper are some of the proud faces of the modern Bahamas.

But our homeland didn't always afford such opportunities.

Although I've been focused this morning on what we have in common, I should say we likely grew up quite differently. I grew up barefoot, running around Cat Island, a small rural island in The Bahamas with a population of a few hundred. I got into a fair amount of trouble. I'm sure many of you can relate to that.

My grandparents were subsistence farmers, who were never taught to read or write. My father was a fireman, my mother a domestic worker.

When I was a young boy, people of my race, people like me, had no right or ability to vote for their government, and certainly no right to have a say in how the country was run.

That I might grow up to become Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, was beyond their imagination.

And probably beyond my imagination, too.

But nothing should hold back the size and shape of your dreams.

It is our talent for imagination and creativity that makes us human.

As far as we know, human beings are the only creatures on earth, endowed with the ability to imagine an alternative reality, and the ability to work together creatively to make it so.

We can look at an empty space and imagine the house that will one day become our home.

We can project many years ahead and imagine travelling to other planets.

So let's decide, you and I, to make the most of the gift of imagination and creativity, and to never allow the fears or limitations of others to overtake our sense of what is possible, for ourselves and for our countries.

In our fast-paced world, where a digital distraction is always one tap or click away, let's commit to finding our own space and quiet places, to be sure the voice we're following is really our own.

You know by now that the world is not always fair, not always just. But you know, too, that the pursuit of justice, the willingness to get into what John Lewis called "good trouble", will attract some of the finest people into your life.

We are a part of something bigger than ourselves, to which we make a unique and irreplaceable contribution.

I have a Christian faith, and so I understand the bigger picture in terms of God and Creation.

Whatever you believe, holding on to a bigger picture helps to anchor and secure your sense of purpose.

The job I do, the job of running a country, is currently held by approximately 200 people on the planet.

Many think that those of us who do this kind of job are driven by ruthless ambition. Unfortunately, that is certainly true of some, but many of my fellow leaders – a great deal more than the cynics would have one believe -- are driven by a simple belief: that we can make things better for our people. To paraphrase the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, we are driven not by the love of power but by the power of love.

Standing here today, looking at your proud parents and thinking about the challenges you'll face, this is my ultimate wish for you – that you know the kind of transcendent love which connects humanity.

The love which will inspire you to do great things, no matter which path you choose.

And I pray that the celebration and optimism of this moment carries you forward for a long time to come.

Because as you're living your life forward, making your own mistakes, and charting your own course, I believe you'll also be finding new solutions to the world's most urgent challenges, and creating new possibilities today's children can hardly dream of.

I wish you well!

Thank you.