

OUR OPINION

Steelband has come of age

THE most underutilised resource in Trinidad and Tobago is the steelband. But that is about to change if we are to take the Minister of Industry, Enterprise and Tourism, Ken Gordon at his word.

Mr Gordon, speaking at the inauguration ceremony of Pan Trinbago's North American chapter, reiterated his Government's intention to make steelband an important part of this country's thrust.

"Steelband," he noted at the Dag Hammarskjold Auditorium of the United Nations "demonstrates to the world the unique talents of Trinidad and Tobago." Who will argue with that? And which steelband pioneer, 50 years ago, would have predicted that a Government Minister would be presiding over the kind of function in the august surroundings that Mr Gordon did in New York last Saturday.

"Pan" has not only come of age. It has extended its boundaries. So there was the Minister talking to 100 steelbandsmen representing 13 steelbands, all of whom have never played in Trinidad and Tobago and whose area of activity is not the Caribbean but the many cities in the United States.

And even if we concede that the steelband's migration to the U.S was inevitable given the existence of large West Indian communities in that country, its ongoing spread to Europe and, more recently, China can be due to nothing else but the intrinsic worth of the instrument.

It would be untrue to say that the People's National Movement(PNM) in the 30 years at the helm of Trinidad and Tobago did nothing for the steelband movement. Under the PNM, the art form fairly galloped from its early days. The late Dr Eric Wil-

liams persuaded the business community to sponsor steelbands and, as the country's fortunes rose during the oil boom, steelbands won larger and larger prize-monies and shared some portion of the oil wealth. Certainly, steelbands enjoyed more respect with the coming of the PNM than they did under the colonial regime.

But there was never any sustained attempt to promote tourism by way of the steelband. The truth is Dr Williams and the PNM were ideologically against tourism itself in spite of the ritual invocations that were made. So there never was any official plan to market steelband to the outside world as appears to be in the making now.

And yet, that market has always been there. From the first steelband to leave these shores in 1951, the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra(TASPO) to Phase II's triumphant tour of New York, last month, international audiences have always responded to the pull of the steelband. So Mr Gordon is on solid ground here.

Mr Gordon did not disclose details of the marketing plan in New York except to indicate that negotiations were underway. We trust, however, that it will open up opportunities for enterprising steelbandsmen over and above what they may earn simply for playing. Self-help is one of the new watchwords of the NAR administration but without it, the steelband movement would never have reached where it has today. If under this administration steelbands are given scope to act on their own initiative, then the tradition set so many years ago will redound to today's panmen in terms of the dollars and cents that its members so desperately need.