

FRANKLY SPEAKING

“En Brera” – No Choice.

The modern state of Israel emerged after a hard-fought military, diplomatic, economic and social struggle, over-coming over-whelming odds. Various pundits have attributed that success to a variety of factors including an illustrious succession of eminent national leadership figures, the support of the United States of America at critical times when the embattled country was under threat of annihilation, and recurring dissension even incompetence among its major adversaries, situations which were exploited by Israeli strategists. Even if this might partly explain the story of survival, the question remains, how could a fledgling entity of some three million people, most of them newly arrived in this new land from various parts of the globe, each weaned on different traditions, speaking a variety of languages, overcome an entrenched surrounding enemy of over ninety million, supported militarily by the might of the then Soviet empire?

Much credit must be given to the unifying promise of a return to the ancestral homeland (Zionism) and the pervading national philosophy of success at any cost colloquially termed “en brera” or, no other choice. The few, who had survived the scourge of the European Nazi Holocaust and the betrayal by the Western powers in coming so reluctantly and so late to their aid, knew that remaining in their native countries (many of them under Soviet domination) was not an attractive proposition. Those fortunate enough to have fled knew that a return to Europe was out of the question. The Jewish pockets which had over the centuries called Palestine home on sufferance from their Arab neighbors, together with those who had filtered in despite the British embargo recognized that defeat would condemn them to a fate worse than before. Many Western European countries were reluctant to open their doors to large Jewish refugee populations confiding in a “one Jew is one too many” policy. Indeed, for the budding state of Israel it had to be victory and security at all costs. There was no choice!

For us, in the Caribbean, there is a lesson to be learned.

Our so-called political leadership echoing the lament of their bureaucrats and mandarins, and vice-versa, has constantly bemoaned its perception of an increasingly hostile international economic environment. That leadership’s recourse is to seek intervention and assistance from presumed benevolent countries and agencies for financial support as elementary as for basic data collection and discounted fuel prices to new trading arrangements and funding of infra-structural works. This approach appears to be the keystone of national and regional policy in today’s Caribbean. When these efforts have borne fruit, it has invariably been a poisoned offering. As well-discussed in the fall-out from the CARIFORUM-EU Partnership Agreement, the anticipated benefits have been slow in coming and instead these small economies lie even more open to exploitation by powerful European, and latterly, Chinese, Japanese and North American economic interests.

For those countries impetuous enough to enter into the ALBA/Petro-Caribe arrangement, economic, educational and technical assistance have been realized at a cost to territorial sovereignty in some cases, and puppet-string attachments within diplomatic relationships, in others. Some bilateral assistance programs have seen a controversial entry of non-traditional partners into the economic and social life of some Caribbean states, increasingly to the disadvantage of nationals, or the granting of permits for the eventual extirpation of national/regional resources.

To put the kindest face on this voluntary subjection, one might say that such intrusions have been permitted in the vain belief that thereby, these territories might seek to gain time, new opportunities, some flexibility, maybe even some policy wiggle-room pending some future imaginary break-out of economic sovereignty and independent action. Few will question that the continuing supplicant-mendicant policy prevalent in today's Caribbean can be anything other than temporary, transient at the risk of being self-defeating. On their own, the individual Caribbean jurisdictions are doomed to this little heralded and abhorrent policy trend. To be realistic, progressive and forward-looking, they have no choice ("en brera") but to come together in a close and effective collaboration or association, union even, and the longer they delay, the more remote that possibility and more desperate their plight!

This is only partially a politically-centered issue requiring a political decision. Firstly, the Caribbean's current predicament is an issue to be communicated to, understood by and acted upon by all strata of Caribbean society. It must lead to an all-embracing social consensus that straddles political parties, socio-economic interests and territorial borders. It is not sufficient for bureaucrats to hint obliquely at its importance for saving the Caribbean. The significant regional institutions such as the CARICOM Secretariat, the OECS Secretariat, the Caribbean Development Bank, the University of the West Indies, should they be persuaded as to its validity, committed to its immediacy and must state unequivocally that Caribbean Unity is a *sine qua non* for progress. It cannot be a footnote to discourses on the way forward for the Caribbean; it cannot be left hanging at the tail-end of reviews on economic performance (or non-performance) of national jurisdictions. The political leadership singly and together must be told, in as many words, "en brera"--- we have no choice but to unite! Time is running out. Either Caribbean unity or colonies forever, in fact if not in name, pawns in the grand geopolitical game.

The Big Picture.

Whether we like it or not, oppressive forces adverse to our integrity, culture, economic stability and self-determination are at our doorstep and in some cases, are well within our gates. Territories of the Caribbean must combine to engage these influences in a more credible manner.

- **Notwithstanding the high development cost, the Caribbean continues to lose its brightest and best to recruitment by more developed jurisdictions for a number of reasons. The Caribbean continues to lag far behind the rest of the world in providing the career opportunities and professional experience and exposures for which professionals of today are becoming prepared. Singly, these territories will remain backwaters of research and development. Invention and innovation will not flower in areas lacking the critical mass in scholarship, business and entrepreneurial leadership and technological acumen.**
- **Therefore, the Caribbean must attack the frontiers of knowledge and innovation on a shared and coordinated basis, knowing that excellence in research and development is not necessarily the preserve of the big and well-endowed, but by specialization, niche opportunities can reveal themselves to the small and ready. However, the ability to bring ideas to market is assisted by size.**
- **Through cooperative action, these islands might be able to “spear above their weight class”, taking advantage of natural, locational, resource and other endowments. For example, the Caribbean is the world’s primary destination for cruise ship tourism, yet because of separate territorial agendas it is yet unable to yield sufficient influence to require widening of the shoulder tourist seasons. Also, despite the reality of natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes) and the fact of significant private foreign investment especially in the tourism and related sectors, these territories are loathe to require foreign contributions to addressing this reality of disaster preparedness for fear of chasing investment to less demanding territories.**
- **The region must address the dilemma of seeking strength through unity while yet retaining the strength which comes from individual representation in the councils of the international community. Whatever the mechanism that emerges to address this issue, the Caribbean must pool its combined resources in engaging the most competent professionals in presenting and defending their concerns in the world’s capitals and before world assemblies.**
- **The Caribbean is a region defined by its surrounding marine resources. It cannot allow those resources to be exploited by outsiders because together we lack a coordinated and enforceable framework to secure our regional territorial interests.**
- **These islands will be all the poorer for permitting, consciously or by default, interlopers from far and near to claim and appropriate sovereignty to the undersea oil, gas and mineral resources without an effective combined response.**
- **The Caribbean Sea is increasingly becoming the crossroads for ocean travel by recreational and commercial shipping of all kinds. The incidence of**

pollution from this traffic is on the rise and with movements of nuclear wastes, oil shipments and chemical cargo of all types, the safety and integrity of this corridor demand reporting, monitoring, regulation, policing, enforcement not by the likely perpetrators of infringements but by those most affected.

- **Despite the lucrative regional air travel industry potential, the emergence of an integrated and rational Caribbean airline industry remains frustrated by divisive squabbling, meanwhile permitting extra-regional interests to grab the lion's share of this market, without compensatory benefits.**
- **The Caribbean is now, unfortunately, a significant staging and trans-shipment region for narcotics and other prohibited material from local and Latin American sources to North America and European destinations. The factors contributing to this phenomenon need to be understood and addressed at source rather than imposing an onus on these limited resource and highly sensitive societies to interdict this trade. The islands must come together in design of a credible response of their own making appropriate to their own circumstances in the first instance, with room for participation of other affected areas, subsequently.**
- **The Caribbean territories, as a system of oceanic islands, are among the most threatened by the phenomenon of global warming and climate change. This is exacerbated by two factors. Global warming and climate change are historically primarily creations of the developed world though in current times, the newer developing countries of China, India and Brazil are emerging as significant contributors. Secondly, in the Caribbean, the concentration of settlements and tourism investments is along the coastal fringes, locations most threatened by virulent storms and rising tides. The united voice of the Caribbean must be heard loudly and clearly on this critical issue and the international response must be substantial and urgent.**

The preceding partial enumeration of issues and problems which demand consideration on a regional basis highlight the urgency for a new dynamic to guide the future of the Caribbean islands. In a later discussion, attention will focus on the positives of proactive united effort in generating growth and development in the context of an integrated regional association. For most perceptive observers the case is clear. Yet Caribbean decision makers have resisted moving resolutely towards a full integration agenda and their advisers have avoided a clear and unambiguous positing of the realities of the future, if they do not. No doubt this disavowal is aided and abetted by foreign countries, institutions and interest groups who have seen special benefit in fragmented and weakened Caribbean voices. But sadly, the greatest impediment lies in the myopic interests of individual leaders who hold on to the 'territorial sovereignty' concept, laughable as that may be, and the prestige, privileges and power that accrue from them.

The patience, tolerance and forbearance of the Caribbean people are not inexhaustible. Unless the lights of hope and reason are soon ignited, they may well conclude that they too have no choice but to

That's the way I see it, anyway.

(THIS IS THE FOURTH IN A SERIES OF FOUR ESSAYS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF DR. JOSEPH BERNARD YANKEY, PUBLIC SERVANT, SCHOLAR, COLLEAGUE AND FRIEND. MAY HE REST IN PEACE).