

Sell DBMC to the highest bidder

by

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The demise of DBMC is a last chance to shift diversification into high gear. When the banana industry was at its peak in the early 90s, it distracted governments from a very positive effort promoted throughout the region. Here in Dominica, six local NGOs led the diversification movement because they foresaw the economic and social disaster we are experiencing today. No one of major influence invested profits from green gold or from any other significant sources into other agricultural commodities needed to feed the nation at the time.

In 1992 Conservationist Atherton Martin warned: “We have the unfortunate situation where we have a massive diversification programme for agriculture in the Eastern Caribbean, but we see that the banana industry appears to be only marginally related to that efforts.”

Martin warned that this was a huge mistake. He said that the banana industry had the most advanced record keeping and accounting system for agricultural production, suggesting it be put at the disposal of any other commodities which farmers were producing. He also wanted the infrastructure developed by the banana industry in research, extension, storage and the import and distribution of inputs be made available to all farmers. He was right then and his comment is even more relevant now. Unfortunately, Mr Martin eventually became the Minister of Agriculture for a brief period. During his tenure, he never got the chance to diversify from the “whaling” issues of his day.

But we still don't get it at this late hour. Government is still not sure what to do with the remains of the DBMC after it is dissolved month-end. A proposal by some 30 farmers to continue sending green bananas to Europe is the best alternative so far. The rest of the country is on the fence of the banana fields, watching a great asset go to the dogs.

Even if these entrepreneurs have national development interests, they are looking to make personal profit of what's left of the industry. I submit we can do more than just splitting the spoils here- we can do a lot more with the remains of the DBMC than we are planning right now. Seven thousand farmers could not prevent the demise of the DBMC. Why would even the 30 best of the 7,000 farmers now save the industry through the magic wand of privatisation? Privatisation, mind you, is the selling off of public property.

The cash starved government is still wondering what to do with the debts and assets of DBMC, even after it has decided to do away with the burden. Let me suggest they sell it to the highest bidder. But there is a problem there too. DBMC is insolvent - it owes more than it owns or earns. Whatever happens, government cannot afford to give away the assets of DBMC to private citizens for free. Government is bankrupt also.

If any private concerns want to do with the banana business at this, the eleventh hour, to make a profit, let them do so at their own risk. This means putting up the investment and capital required to do so. In return, they can enjoy the profits they make. But for now, we must realize that all the efforts over the years to save the banana industry has left the country unable to feed itself. Let this sacrifice not be in vain.

I suggest Vanoult House become the new home for the Ministry of Agriculture. One floor of this new home should become the Nathalie Andrew Product Development Centre. The new ministry's mandate would be to consolidate the local NGO diversification initiatives throughout the island, on the one hand, and to diversify within the banana industry on the other.

DBMC did such a wonderful job at producing bananas. The next logical step is to make products from these bananas, reducing wastage and extending the shelf life of the fruit. This gives farmers a chance to stockpile their produce. Then, they can find better markets and better prices for their products. Bananas can be to Dominica what maize is to South America, what wheat is to North America, and what rice is to Asia.

Whether directly or indirectly, government can no longer put money into bananas the way it was done in the past. It must use the banana facilities to bring other crops to the level of efficiency seen in banana production in the 80s and 90s. Government would be investing in agriculture and not just bananas.

Banana can spearhead import substitution in the true sense of the word: banana flour, vinegar, flakes, ketchup, juice, baby food, paper, jam, toys, dolls, rum, wines, ice-creams, porridge. Back in 1992, Nathalie Andrew said that she had already developed 47 products from bananas. Today, she boasts of 90 possibilities. With these products, we can fill those containers and reefers, leaving our ports empty after dumping goods on our shores. Many of those products are already being produced right here in Dominica.

The Ministry of Agriculture would be near the AID Bank. These two institutions can work closely to help farmers secure financing for diversification projects. Not far off on the hillside, the Ministry would also push for a department of agro-business at the Dominica College. Otherwise, we would be engaging more of the same failing practices and going backward.

If a few brilliant farmers think they can save the banana industry by making it private, using government resources at this juncture, they have gone bananas. And if government can support such an initiative, by giving taxpayers' assets and money to private concerns, instead of investing in a meaningful programme of diversification, they've gone nuts. Nuts and bananas will not take us through this current crisis.

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