

Truth and Politics

The following two articles, published in the *Dominica Chronicle* in July, 2011, on the above subject are considered sufficiently instructive and revealing that DAAS decided to record them, unedited, for reference in its Discussion Papers.

'The Uncompromising Politics of Truth', by Dr Philbert Aaron, July 01, 2011

'Dr Aaron's Thesis on Politics and Truth', by Sir Brian Alleyne, July 08, 2011

The Uncompromising Politics of Truth

by

Dr Philbert Aaron, PhD

The word 'truth' is now part of the political language of the Opposition. Growing up, I don't recall 'truth' having such great political currency. It was probably most often used in the expression, "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God," which, coming to think of it, was the language of the court made popular in crime fiction.

I am not sure when 'truth' entered politics. Maybe it was during DLP and DFP's moral crusade to vote the UWP out of office in 2000. Maybe 'truth' is the result of an obsession with the law. After all, use of the word 'persons' for 'people' and pronouncing the last syllable in 'government' as 'MUNT' may be of similar origin: the legalization of Dominican culture by way of the law schools of the University of the West Indies. Or maybe 'truth' in our current political vocabulary comes from the church, which would be interesting.

Related words such as 'honest' and 'fraudulent' have also gained a certain currency alongside 'fair and balanced.' There is 'honest' in the name of a political website that is devoted to Dominica politics. A statement on that site announces, "We the people in defense of truth, righteousness and justice." A Monday January 17, 2010 political meeting by the Workers Party boasted, "more 'truths' are expected to be revealed."

Opposition Leader, Hon. Hector John talks 'truth.' In a telephone call to the June 22, 2011 edition of *The Heng* talk show on Kairi FM Radio, John suggested that truth was on one side only, his. In an earlier sit-down interview on the same show, he boasted that he didn't mind being a lone voice in the wilderness just as long as he was on the side of truth.

Truth as a reality is a good thing. But 'truth' is part of moral/religious language. Morality and religion deal with absolutes. They broker no compromise. It is all or nothing, take it or leave it. This is customer unfriendly stuff. Which is probably why the Opposition is committed to permanent minority status. And it is not because there are only a few good men in Dominica or that they are all to be found in the UWP. No, the vast majority of Dominicans are decent people. That UWP rails against all and sundry is only because they are in a mental rut.

Peter F. Drucker, the modern management guru was a student of both theology and of management. "Leaders shouldn't attach moral significance to their ideas,"

Drucker warned. "Do that, and you can't compromise." Politics is the art of compromise. So he who is unable to compromise is in a dog fight without a dog stick.

In "The Age of Social Transformation," Drucker analysed the politics of values. "To an environmentalist," Drucker wrote, "half an endangered species is an extinct species. This greatly aggravates the crisis of modern government. And each of these new moral concerns, each represented by a new organisation, claims to stand for an absolute. Dividing their loaf is not compromise; it is treason." MRD anyone?

Whoever started it, the moral crusade in politics is currently the legacy of former journalist turned political operative of the Workers Party, talk show host, Lennox Linton. Linton's ability to stick to a topic and not move on is a personal trait he is proudly incapable of correcting. All by himself, Linton has UWP in that mental rut with his mission to 'speak truth to power.'

A rut is problem for a commercial talk show. Most people can only take the same noise for so long before they beat their heads into walls. The rut attracts fanatical support among a few while it forbids new audiences. It can be the kiss of death for a political party in a democratic system where majority rules.

That is why the UWP is stuck. Yes, stuck. Stuck with issues. Stuck with the solutions they choose. Stuck in their ways. Stuck with the same graying beards. And unable to get out of the rut. Or in the language of the now famous Evelyn cartoon in the Chronicle, unable to put rubber on the road.

Electoral politics is about compromise. And politics whose goal is economic and social advancement is the ultimate compromise politics. In The Age of Social Transformation, Drucker wrote: "Economic interests can be compromised, which is the great strength of basing politics on economic interests. 'Half a loaf is still bread' is a meaningful saying. But half a baby, in the biblical story of the judgment of Solomon, is not half a child. No compromise is possible."

The Dominica Labour Party, a grown up daughter of the British Labour Party is about economic advancement. That is why DLP has been able to wax and wane over fifty-six years and bounced back after Patrick John almost killed it in 1979. That is why it attracts men and women who can compromise.

An example of a man who can compromise is Rosie Douglas, the late DLP Political Leader and Prime Minister. A Black Power radical in the 1970s, in Chains or Change, he wrote of the DLP, "Our Labour Party is as fraudulent as its British predecessor." Of the DFP, he wrote, "As for the Freedom party, they advocate and practice anything but freedom." Yet, Rosie under the pressure of reality, made three historic compromises.

First, he renounced Black Power. Next, he joined DLP by way of DemLab. Finally, as leader of DLP, he formed a coalition with DFP in 2000. The rest is history. Roosevelt Skerrit, the current Prime Minister who was recruited by Rosie has reached out and brought in men and women from both sides of the political aisle of Dominica. In foreign policy, Skerrit bridges Left and Right of the geopolitical divide.

During the bugging fiasco in the 1990s, UWP fell in a rut that is similar to the present anti-Skerrit rut of today. Justin Simon, Dominican QC and now Attorney General of Antigua and Barbuda famously advised that they move on. Awa! Theirs was a moral crusade with no compromise.

In 2011, like Justin Simon in the 1990s, Sir Brian Alleyne and Dr. Severin have publicly advised UWP to stop obsessing about Skerrit. Old habits, however, die hard. Especially when you are all about speaking truth to power.

Look for UWP to speak in absolutes about the 2011-2012 National Budget this week. They will find nothing good in it. In the meantime, life goes on without them. Well, what else is new?

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Dr Aaron's Thesis on Politics and Truth

by

Sir Brian Alleyne, SC, KCN

I read with much consternation the article contributed by your columnist, Dr. Philbert Aaron in your July 1 publication.

I want to begin by saying that I am always pleased and proud to be mentioned alongside Dr. Francis Severin, a young man (in relation to my own age) for whom I have the greatest admiration for his intellect, his independence and integrity, his national spirit and his demonstrated commitment to the people of Dominica and to the national interest. I doubt very much that Dr. Severin will appreciate being associated, by implication, with Dr Aaron's thesis that politics and truth are incompatible. I certainly do not appreciate being identified, even by sly implication, with such a notion. I do not claim to be without stain or blemish, but I absolutely reject any attempt to associate me with what I consider to be Dr. Aaron's machiavellian and wholly unprincipled proposition that truth has no place in politics. It is little wonder that, with that philosophy apparently guiding the actions and postures of the Dominica Labour Party and the Government which that Party leads, that there are so many, and such persistent, clouds of suspicion over the actions of that Government.

I can interpret Dr. Aaron's article in no other way than conveying that honesty and integrity (truth) has no place in politics. Dr. Aaron says he is "not sure when truth entered politics". Can you believe that? He posits that "maybe truth is the result of an obsession with the law." So perhaps the law also has no place in politics. Dr Aaron, the publicist for the Government of Dominica and the Dominica Labour Party, is perhaps re-emphasising Prime Minister Skerrit's declaration that no law, no Constitution, will prevent him from contesting the last election. I am not prejudging whether Mr. Skerrit was or was not qualified for election, but the clear implication of his statement, which I

heard myself, is that he was unconcerned whether he was breaking the law or not, in putting himself up for election.

If truth has no place in politics, then honesty, integrity and accountability have no place in politics. That is certainly not the philosophy on which Commonwealth Parliaments, of which our Parliament is one, operate. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), of which Dominica's Parliament is a member, and all our Parliamentarians and most past Parliamentarians are also members, recently published a report entitled The Overseers. At page 9 ff, the authors posit that "our whole system of government is executive, legislative and judicial is part of the accountability mechanisms existing within a state, as are other components of civil society such as the press and voluntary organisations.

"Our Parliaments themselves have developed a number of means of subjecting the executive arm of government to accountability. Such procedures as questions, urgent debates, private members' motions, and adjournment debates allow members to raise issues relating to the use or proposed use of government power, to call upon the government to explain actions it has taken, and to require it to defend and justify its policies or administrative decisions.

"Accountability is about instilling or reinforcing an ethos of legal compliance and efficient practice. It works by motivating people in ways that are beyond their direct control to engage in desired conduct. At its highest level, if a government is required to answer on the floor of the House for its actions, that is a real incentive for ministers to avoid improper or imprudent actions that are likely to be revealed by parliamentary scrutiny."

The above quotes from the political organisation (not opposition but parliamentary) the CPA, are in themselves sufficient to wholly debunk Dr. Aaron's immoral, unprincipled and ridiculous thesis; a thesis, however, which seems to have guided much government action in the past few years. On the religious/moral/integrity plane, we can turn to some powerful words of the leader of the largest Christian church in Dominica, indeed in the world; sentiments which would undoubtedly find favour with other Christian denominations as well as other spiritual and religious groups.

Commenting on such cynical attitudes to truth as contained in Dr. Aaron's article, Pope Benedict XVI in Light of the World; a conversation with Peter Seewald; Ignatius Press, (the Church, yes!) had this to say:

"But viewed in that way, man would not be capable of ethical values, either. Then he would have no standards. Then he would only have to consider how he arranged things reasonably for himself, and then at any rate the opinion of the majority would be the only criterion that counted. History, however, has sufficiently demonstrated how destructive majorities can be, for instance in systems such as Nazism and Marxism, all of which also stood against truth in particular."

Would it be farfetched to conclude, in light of Dr. Aaron's statements as the public relations voice of the Dominica Labour Party and the present Government of Dominica, that we are on the road to an elimination of ethical values, of standards, and that they are concerned only, or mainly, with how to arrange things reasonably for themselves? These are questions we must ask ourselves urgently.

It is true that the Pope is a religious leader, and therefore would be dismissed out of hand by Dr. Aaron. But let us take heed that Dr. Aaron's cynical and profoundly amoral, if not immoral view, is reminiscent of Pontius Pilate's offhand dismissal of Jesus, when Pilate exclaimed, "Truth? What is truth?" Yet in spite of Pilate, and Aaron, Jesus is today, and has been for 2000 years, and will forever be, the most powerful political figure in history. (In saying this I do not imply that Jesus was or is only, or primarily, a political figure, but there is no doubt that his message has had a profound influence on the politics of much of the world for 2000 years.)

The author of the book, Speak Truth to Power, Kerry Kennedy, in his introduction to the book, speaks of the men and women he portrays, in terms of "courage, with its affirmation of possibility and change, is what defines them, singly and together. Each spoke to me with compelling eloquence of the causes to which they have devoted their lives, and for which they are willing to sacrifice them ^{all} from freedom of expression to the rule of law, from environmental defence to eradicating bonded labour, from access to capital to the right to due process, from women's rights to religious liberty. As the Martin Luther Kings of their countries, these leaders hold in common an inspiring record of accomplishment and a profound capacity to ignite change." I only hope, and pray (yes, pray!) that Dr Aaron and his disciples have not succeeded in so corrupting the minds of the majority of Dominicans that we may abandon the virtues of honesty, integrity, commitment to truth and devotion to our Christian religious convictions which have guided our country at political as well as secular levels until recently and hopefully until now.

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