

Remembering Zion

*"By the Rivers of Babylon, There we sat down,
And there we'll wail,
When we remember Zion. But the wicked*

*Carried us away in captivity,
Required from us a song.
But how can we sing the Alpha song
In a strange land."*

(The Melodions, "Rivers of Babylon".)

Purpose

This brief discussion provides an overview on some of the background issues pertaining to diasporas in general and the case of Dominica, in particular. By reference to the experience of other diasporas, it attempts to understand the relationships and dynamics between a scattered people and their homelands. Hopefully, it will provide some direction finders for the work underway in attempting to develop new, thoughtful and fruitful insights between the government of Dominica and its nationals dispersed in the "strange lands" across the globe. This paper by itself will provide no opinions, answers or recommendations on the nature, quality or intensity of the bonds that ought to exist between Zion (Dominica) and her sons and daughters in diaspora. Those issues will flow out of the more focussed work which is the subject of the Draft Policy Paper that this overview introduces. As we all set our minds and hearts to this task, let us remember that there are lessons to be learned from the experience of others as we craft, sing and act out our songs of redemption. We can only guess at this stage what these factors might be in the Dominica situation. What they are and to what degree they apply will form the context of the recommended policy paper which we, nationals at home and abroad together, are working to prepare.

Diaspora, then and now

In speaking of "diaspora", or "the scattering of a people away from their traditional or ancestral homelands", one instinctively thinks of the experience of the Jewish people. Driven from their homeland, wandering for centuries in exile, often persecuted in lands of their adoption, they maintained their ethnic, religious and cultural distinctiveness, together with emotional links to their dispossessed homeland in anticipation of the day when they would return to the land of their fathers. Even today, despite the fact of the restoration of the Jewish state of Israel, the sense of belonging among Jews no matter where they reside in the world, continues strong. In part this may be due to an undiminished connectiveness through race, language and religion. In part, because they continue to share a spirit of activism and sacrifice in the economic and military support for and defense of the nation of Israel under threat.

Such a concept of "diaspora", the so-called ideal case, needs to be applied with various qualifications to the experiences of other displaced, migrant or otherwise scattered people. Because it may well be that to the extent that the defining variables of the Jewish case do not apply, one cannot assume that the success enjoyed by the world Jewry and Israel connection can be hoped for, still less achieved, in other cases. At the same time, against the background of the Jewish experience, some observations can be drawn. Chief among these is that the links between a scattered people and their traditional homelands can be established, successfully nurtured and profitably developed for the mutual benefit of homeland and non-resident nationals. For example, the strength

of support by Jews abroad for the nation of Israel may be attributed to the ethno-cultural links which are part of the historical traditions of the people. These links are cemented by religion, consolidated by memories of discrimination and persecution, and sustained by a determination that Israel must remain as a place of safe return for the Jewish people. It would be misleading to believe that even when Israel did not physically exist as a nation, the relationship between the exiles and the longed-for homeland was a one-way linkage. In fact, the Promise of return, supported by myth, tradition, religion and the lure of the ancient biblical heritage was as sustaining and supporting as any formal, active national policy of refuge and protection.

Modern Models

More recent models to a greater or lesser extent follow the Jewish pattern. One example is displayed in the case of the Irish diaspora. Colonised by an invader and ousted from their lands, destitute through famine, many of Ireland's children were forced to scatter and seek new opportunities in newly developing lands such as North America and Australia. Even in their new homes they were subject to various degrees of persecution and discrimination. In response, these hardy people developed an even stronger sense of community and consolidation of interests for their common protection. The links between diaspora and the homeland were sustained over the years by a combination of group solidarity, by continuing infusion of new blood through immigration, by the strength of a religious faith and by the unflagging memories of a life that was "in the old country" before the intruders came. Memories maintained by culture, legends and myths, of places and celebrations as hallowed as time. Small wonder then that the fight for a free united Ireland received such, financial, material and moral support from the overseas diaspora. Small wonder now that a resurgent, economically vibrant Ireland relies so much on a return of skills, technology and investment from her now affluent children in the distant lands to which they had been banished.

The Cuban diaspora offers up a still different example of how those in exile might relate to the homeland. The Socialist revolution resulted in dispossession, emigration and in some cases, exile of sections of the Cuban society unwilling to support the new social, economic and political regime. Settling principally in South Florida and Venezuela, these transplanted Cuban nationals continue to maintain vibrant communities nurtured on a strong antipathy to the Cuban government. Having grown in numbers and economic influence, and living in concentrations, they have managed to exert considerable political influence on State and Federal government policy in relation to their interest at home and to the government in their homeland. Unable to reclaim their former privilege and heritage they continue to foment rebellion, invasion and confrontation as a prelude to the overthrow of the government and a return from exile.

One further case deserves mentioning. The period of British colonial expansion, consolidation and exploitation, especially following the abolition of slavery, required large infusion of cheap labor to work the plantations now deserted by the slaves. One such source was the Indian peninsular which contributed numbers of indentured workers to the Caribbean as well as to other plantation colonies of South-east Asia, Southern and East Africa.. In recent years, many of these affected areas have themselves been subjected to re-migrations to beckoning metropolises of North America and Europe. Today, East Indian racial communities overseas (Non-Resident Indians), many of them having accumulated substantial economic resources in their new "hostlands" are being actively wooed by the Government of India. Their potential for providing the means of short-circuiting the "developmental gap" between the developing Indian society and the developed economies has been recognized, and is being co-opted. Their skills, knowledge, experience, exposure, investment potential all are powerful additions to the required development assets. Their networks and voting numbers in the "hostlands" provide vehicles for publicizing and promoting their homeland's national interests in the various metropolitan centres.

Noticeably, the ability to call upon these communities for support relies on predominant factors of ethnic and cultural affiliations to areas of the motherland, if not to the concept of India as presently constituted. Religious connections and the practice of looking to the homeland for spouses have contributed to maintaining the links. Tensions with the neighboring state of Pakistan, internal frictions surrounding Kashmir, pride over India's nuclear technological achievements, among others, foster a continuing allegiance. Today, the Indian government actively seeks to expand and reinforce those relationships by encouraging second and third generation diaspora to visit the home country, and it provides scholarships to children of the diaspora in order to further develop these relationships.

The Caribbean Contrast.

Against this varying background of experiences, what has been the Caribbean reality? The predominant racial and ethnic group of the islands are residents by reason of a forced relocation. This was a transplantation complemented by a deliberate policy of weakening the cultural fabric of the slaves through a "resettlement" so vile that even the basic concept of family among the slaves was repudiated by the slavers. Tribal linkages and lineages were discarded, ethnic practices and languages were prohibited, all in order to effect an absolute break with the ancestral home, Africa, and to deny any sense of community, cooperation, group identification among the slaves themselves. Being subject to arbitrary relocation through re-sales or loans, the slaves' sense of affinity for an area or landscape was diminished. Unlike the Jews, there was no promise of a return from exile, and all the legends, observances, myths and beliefs were destroyed. Unlike the Irish, several generations of slavery were to pass before an opportunity to accumulate resources and assets could be realized. Even so, that opportunity was not one of a wide open frontier as in North America which greeted the Irish, but a continuing relegation to the sidelines of social, economic and political activity. Like the ethnic Indians, many of the Caribbean peoples have determined that opportunities exist outside the colonial setting to which they had been removed. Unlike the Indians, such re-migrations to England, Canada and the United States occurred initially as individuals, in anonymity and by and large to dispersed areas without support of "the ties that bind" of language, religion, culture etc.

The inhabitants of the Caribbean area are a migrant people. Whether located by force or induced by promises of wealth or established by privilege or attracted by lifestyle or victims of circumstance, we have arrived on these shores and here we have created a unique and in some ways enviable society. Considering the short period since abolition and the continuance of the critical factors of economic growth in alien hands, communities of understanding and tolerance with creditable achievement in education, the arts, health care have still emerged across the archipelago. It is unfortunate that in the fields of science and technology, business and production so much still remains to be done. To a large extent, significant private investment in much of the local economies have been the results of remittances from nationals resident abroad. Early out-migration, too, has acted as a release valve for the pressures of unemployment and underemployment which have been built up over the years. In the apologetic words of the poet.....

*"True patriots all,
For be it understood,
We left our country
For our country's good."*

However, in many instances, the islands have lost some of their best and brightest, some of their most skilled and ambitious, some of their most adventuresome and innovative to metropolitan countries. The vacuum created by these outflows is palpable in even the most cursory examination of current development challenges in the islands. But this may only be a temporary setback with potential beneficial results if the islands are able to draw from these migrants and their equally skilled and motivated children (second and third generation diaspora) the necessary human resources to address the challenges of a global economy and society (reverse brain drain).

Historically, in a succession of periodic emigrations, Caribbean islanders have toiled in the canefields of the Dominican Republic. They have dared the hazards and heartbreaks of the Demerara goldfields. They have sweltered in the back-breaking work of building the Panama Canal. They have endured the social isolation of the oil refineries of Curacao and Aruba. They have entered the large metropolitan centres of the United States and Canada. They swelled the working populations of industrial Britain. With each wave, they made their contributions to their new homes and continued to support, contribute to and promote private and community projects and ventures in the lands they left behind. Now, they and their progeny can be found in the boardrooms of large transnational corporations, on the faculty of distinguished academic institutions, on the staff of groundbreaking laboratories. They are in government and politics, determining and affecting national policies. They are at the forefront of the learned professions, and are spearheading the scientific and technological revolution. They are consultants of every sort, engineers, accountants, in advertising and promotion, in the leisure, hospitality and entertainment industry and holding their own as competent equals in the competitive global economy. They are qualified teachers, nurses, skilled tradesmen, independent business owners. They man law-enforcement agencies and help fill the ranks of the military.

The existence of this remarkable resource has not gone unnoticed. Already, the Government of Jamaica in a series of remarkable and ground-breaking initiatives has established arrangements and relationships to enlist Jamaicans abroad in the national development effort. The government is purposefully embarked on programs of trying to identify their nationals abroad; of providing information and support services favorable to their investment at home; of facilitating return of non-resident nationals desiring to do so; of accommodating individuals and groups wishing to donate to institutions and communities at home; and in energizing nationals abroad in promoting the national interest in their various countries. This is only a beginning, and the scope for a mutually rewarding relationship in the long term is immense. Other Caribbean leaders, particularly Dr. Gonsalves of the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States (and Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines) have expressed interest in these policy directions and in adopting them as deemed appropriate in their individual jurisdictions. Whatever the success achieved on an individual island basis, the benefits multiply more than proportionately if the Caribbean nations combine and integrate their efforts in this regard.

The Dominican Diaspora.

Whether labelled a diaspora or simply nationals of Dominica resident abroad, today in many of the large North American and British centres, we exist in greater or lesser numbers, nationals of Dominica by birthright, sons and daughters of Dominica joined to our homeland in heart and mind, part of one people with one past and one destiny. Despite the colonial exploitation that subjugated us; the political bickering that would divide us; the cultural invasions that seek to overwhelm us; the natural disasters that confront us from time to time, we exist. Despite our size that makes self-sufficiency improbable; our economies so exposed to the whims of others; we exist. Whether as an isolated entity or as a part of the Caribbean Community, we have created a new and discernible identity in which we have defined ourselves as societies of merit and worth. Not an accidental creation, but a positive evolution of endurance and tolerance, of concern and mutual support.

*"But how can we sing the Alpha song
In a strange land...."*

And that is the song that we must sing in the strange lands where we now dwell. As we remember our homelands, we remember the little villages skirting the seashore, the small hamlets deep in the valley floor, the houses perched precariously on hilltop and ridge. We remember the festivals and festivities that marked the passage of the year; the crops and produce of a fertile land; the friendships formed at school and work, at sports and church;

the cultural dances, music and the dress; the native dishes and beverages; the oral traditions handed down through the years.

As we have journeyed away from home and have planted new roots on distant shores, these memories remain and are revived in the telling as we meet together. They warm the heart on cold wintry nights and cool the spirits on hot summer days. They are revived with each call to home. They are refreshed with each new face from home. They are the moving forces in responding to a need from home. They cause alarm as disturbing policies and decisions or unfolding events in the homeland raise their head. They are nurtured and fed by visits to the homeland and by information disseminated to the nationals scattered abroad. As generations at home pass away and as new generations come into being in the lands of adoption, conflicting allegiances arise and the intensity of the memories and the fullness of the songs may well wane. Therefore, the nature of the relationship may well need to be re-assessed and redefined. That is the challenge of the modern Dominica diaspora.

It is easy to minimise the journey that we are on and the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead. To do so would be to minimise all of our struggles and the legacy that connects us wherever we are. Whether we stay in the diaspora or return eventually "from exile," the issue is the same and affects us all equally. At the core is the question of defining ourselves positively by who we are, rather than others defining us by who we are not. Only then as individuals, communities and as a nation will we determine what place and space we wish to carve out for ourselves and what contribution we wish to make within a globalizing world. Then, in the various countries where we reside, we can better put into context the policies and practices being pursued, and assess whether or not they promote or frustrate the interests of the land from which we came.

It is a mutual undertaking. Dominica must seek to strengthen its contact and relationship with its nationals abroad, bearing in mind that with each succeeding generation, the nature of the relationship is likely to change and a new set of approaches may be required. Dominicans abroad must seize the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of how they can help and promote the welfare of their homeland which defines them as people of worth both at home and in their "hostlands".

The nature of that relationship will be unique as each one of us is unique. It may learn from the experience of others but must be styled to suit our own circumstances. We may conceive it as an exclusively Dominican creation, but it must be amenable to broadening and deepening to accommodate a Caribbean framework. It must recognise our past, respect our present and be the means of regaining our future. While addressing immediate concerns, it must map a course for our children. Never before have we been so challenged, but never has the opportunity been so great.

Let us all take up the challenge and seize the opportunity to help create new arrangements that work well and produce results. We are all invited to help solve the problems which confront nationals as they live in diaspora, or who occasionally visit home, or who decide to resettle in the land of their birth. We are called upon to renew our commitment to Dominica, and to consider how we can assist the work of growth and development of our island home.

Contribute your ideas on how that transition can be made beneficial and satisfactory for all concerned. Take the time and fill out a [questionnaire](#) or attend a discussion group in your area. Provide " the Committee" with the results of your discussion on suggestions and ideas for a strong and enduring relationship.

*"For we are citizens
Of isles forlorn
Who have left life
That others there might live.
We've come in search of truths,*

*But to return,
To add our measure
To her sun-rich store.
Let none deny his efforts,
Here or there.
For where his heart lies,
There a patriot lives."*
(Frank Watty, "Heart of a Patriot")

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