

THE IDEA OF BARBADOS

By

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Barbados is an idea which has, over time, become manifest in reality. The idea of Barbados encompasses more than a nation-state or a national community. To be sure, it flows from a national community which has been in ownership, not residence, of an especial or particular landscape and seascape. Still, it is more than this; and it assumes a veritable autonomy as a category beyond the community. The Barbadian diaspora, scattered overseas, has come to draw from this “specialness” known as the idea of Barbados. This idea acknowledges that Barbados is unique, sui generis, of its own kind. It is connected to, nay derived from, the physical and historical condition of Barbados, yet transcends it.

The unique “idea of Barbados” does not, and cannot, make Barbados immune from the universal “laws” of history, society or political economy. Indeed, the idea of Barbados has been fashioned through a parallelogram of historical forces and contemporary circumstances, global and regional, which have shaped and conditioned the home-grown evolutions, adaptations, alterations, and changes.

More than any other Caribbean society with the possible exception of Cuba, Barbados has arrived at a place where its uniqueness represents a model of governance, political economy, way of life, and social order, which invites emulation elsewhere in the Caribbean and further afield, albeit with appropriate amendments. Barbados' high quality governance and level of human development have been a marvel to objective observers, including reputable international agencies. On a wide range of governance and developmental indices, Barbados is in the top rank globally; indeed, overall, it is a developing country with developed nations' governance and human development attainments. All this is extraordinary for a country of 166 square miles and a quarter million people, which is less than 200 years removed from slavery and less than 50 years as an independent nation!

I make bold to say that other CARICOM member-states aspire to being an "idea" but none has quite achieved that status. Jamaica is a brand but not an idea. Rastafarianism, Bob Marley, Usain Bolt and Sandals have helped to shape the Jamaican brand, a marketing tool to attract visitors, but it is not a transcendental idea which infuses the body politic and society to consolidated progressive achievements, nationally. Trinidad is an incomplete national formation with immense possibilities but constrained by a bundle of limitations, including rising lawlessness. Guyana's natural condition is still untamed but a nation which

possesses enormous potential. The member-states of the OECS in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, aspire to the Barbados “model” of a maturing social democracy. “Successful” British colonies such as Bermuda and the British Virgin Islands are, in many ways, artificial societies. The French overseas territories of Martinique and Guadeloupe are subsidised enclaves in the region, in search of a Caribbean identity. Puerto Rico is a Caribbean outpost of the American empire, a confused and inchoate territory with an ill-defined future.

This idea of Barbados is not coterminous with a narrow chauvinism, island nationalism or a jaundiced arrogance, though some within and without Barbados may mistake or confuse these with the uplifting “idea” itself. The “idea of Barbados” has saved Barbados in the past and will surely enable Barbados to meet successfully its current economic challenges brought on largely, though not exclusively, by the prolonged global economic slow-down from 2008, and continuing.

Barbados is at once the most conservative and the most progressive society in the Caribbean, bar none! It extols continuity yet engineers, and embraces, change. It is the only Caribbean country that has had, since conquest and settlement, unbroken representative government albeit on a restrictive franchise until the first general elections under universal adult suffrage in 1951. It is the first Caribbean country to

have attained mass adult literacy, universal primary and secondary education, and “free” university education. It is the first Caribbean country to have transformed its economy from sugar to tourism, international financial services, and other services. Very early it embraced the Caribbean Court of Justice and cut its judicial umbilical cord with the British Privy Council, yet it values its connection with the British Crown. Barbados is possessed of “a starched Anglicanism”, to use Gordon Lewis’ telling phrase, but is more relaxed, informally, about homosexuality than any other Caribbean society. It places a premium on the maintenance of law and order, yet zealously guards individual rights and freedoms. And the list goes on!

In Barbados, there is an invisible “genius of the people” which is the foundation of the idea of Barbados. Modern social scientists refer to this social foundation as “social capital” but it is more than this. I find the category of “social capital” an inadequate proxy for the grounded common sense of Barbadians, their social solidarity, their ability to enhance their capacity to come to terms with their condition and environment, and to address in an efficacious way any set of challenges which arise. Other Caribbean societies, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines, display these qualities, but Barbados seems to have them to an extraordinary degree.

There is an undoubted Barbadian sensibility which informs or shapes the individual and collective responses of the Barbadian people. Many other Caribbean nationals perceive this, quite wrongly, as a sense of “Bajan superiority”. It is not that; it is an attribute of quiet assurance, a manifestation of the virtue of self-mastery. That is the well-spring of a civil, and civilised, people steeped in progressive values, but on the bedrock of core values lodged in the social consciousness. More than any other Caribbean nationals, they appreciate that a progressive society is not built on leisure, pleasure and nice-time, but on hard, smart, productive effort. All this is part of the idea of Barbados.

An acute and dispassionate observer of Barbados notices a distinctiveness that goes beyond, and is partly evident from, an especially unique accent in speech, a restraint in the use of bombast in day-to-day language, an intolerance of slipshod work, an insistence that government delivers basic services of quality, a settled but not unsettling “mirror image” of themselves, and an elemental patriotism devoid of gaudy exhibitionism. These observances are evident in the outlook of Barbadians of all walks of life: Rank-and-file Bajans, intellectuals, business folks, Bajan Rastafarians, writers/performers in the field of the creative imagination, civil society leaders, and assorted professionals.

It has always struck me, for instance, that Barbadian entrepreneurs, be they the off-spring of the traditional planter-merchant elite or of the newer type, commit themselves to Barbados in a way which appears to be different and better when compared to the commitment of most of the other Caribbean entrepreneurs to their respective countries. Examples abound from Barbados: The “Big Six” owners, Kiffyn Simpson, the Goddards, C.O. Williams, Rayside, Nassar, Husbands, James Tudor of blessed memory, and other entrepreneurs of more recent vintage.

Likewise, I have noted that Barbadian writers of the creative imagination, an invariably restless breed who roam regionally and globally, return and stay in the land of their birth and socialisation. The most striking example of this is the iconic George Lamming. They simply conclude that Barbados is their natural place to be in very much the same way that international organisations and embassies with assignments to the nation-states of the Eastern Caribbean set up comfortable shops in Barbados. They, too, acknowledge the convenience and modernity of Barbados, but it is their unarticulated recognition of something special: The idea of Barbados.

I have observed that, generally-speaking, the best and brightest of Barbados enter its public service whether in the civil service, the teaching service, the judiciary or politics. At the leadership levels it has

been blessed by brilliant and grounded personalities such as Grantley Adams, Errol Barrow, Tom Adams, Bernard St. John, Henry Forde, Ritchie Haynes, Erskine Sandiford, Owen Arthur, David Thompson, Freundel Stuart, and Mia Mottley. Surely, this constellation constitutes an abundance of riches over a sixty-year period. Of this galaxy, I am of the considered opinion that Errol Barrow is the greatest leader that our CARICOM region has thrown up since universal adult suffrage. In national and regional impact and influence, Barrow compares with Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. This high quality leadership over a sustained period is a manifestation, and a buttress, of the idea of Barbados. In the complex and competitive modern global circumstances, the nurturing of continued quality leadership is an awesome challenge for Barbados. The idea of Barbados is in danger of being undermined if the political system fails to renew and replenish, on an on-going basis, its leadership stock from the best and brightest of Barbados.

I am satisfied that the “idea of Barbados” in tandem with a mature regionalism in CARICOM is the vehicle through which Barbados will successfully meet its current and prospective economic challenges. The idea of Barbados is a shared experience of Barbadians; it belongs to them. However, this shared experience must become a conscious expression and a fully-articulated language for action. It is the frame of reference for continuity and change, orderly governance and profound

alterations in the political economy to accommodate the circumstances at hand. The maturing regional matrices and an alive internationalism provide the context, space, and nexus for the full flowering of the “idea of Barbados”.

In this vein, I pose an overarching query which I raised recently in the context of my Budget Address for St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The query for Barbados is this: Can the socio-economic model initiated by Errol Barrow, perfected by subsequent governments, and which came to maturation under Owen Arthur, be sustained in a period of prolonged global economic slow-down and continued economic uncertainty? If the answer is “Yes”, a temporising wait-and-see attitude or approach may be in order. If the answer is “No”, alterations and adaptations appropriate to the condition are clearly necessary and desirable.

In St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and I suspect in Barbados, a temporising or wait-and-see is out of the question.

An appropriate strategic framework, balancing prudence and enterprise, coupled with specially-targeted interventions, is likely to foster economic growth and fiscal consolidation.

The correct answer to the overarching query which I have posed, within the articulated context of “the idea of Barbados” and its regional-international linkages, is likely to yield uplifting results. Thus, rather than propose a particular policy without an articulated context, the policy should be put within the appropriate strategic framework. Once it is appreciated that the extant socio-economic model is not sustainable at a time of a prolonged global economic slow-down and that Barbados has always triumphed in challenging circumstances, the people are likely to respond understandingly and favourably. So, for example, a contribution from students to their own educational investment at the tertiary level is less likely to be opposed. If the answer to the overarching query, articulated context and strategic framework (including targeted interventions) are fully elaborated, references to “Barrow’s legacy” or “Bajan’s birth right” would be seen as intellectually/practically untenable and demagogic.

I am grappling with similar considerations and policy/programmatic issues in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Unless we have intellectual clarity ourselves, the pandering foolishness emanating from some quarters which ought to know better, would gain currency.

The issues at stake for St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and probably for Barbados, include: Efficient public expenditure; the containment of

recurrent expenditure; efficacious debt management; optimal tax administration; economic growth; job and wealth creation; social cohesion and a reduction in social inequality. These are very challenging and not amenable to quick fixes, particularly in small, open, resource-challenged economies in the context of a global economic slow-down. The chatterati, with their feet firmly planted in the air, have all the facile answers, but no responsibility for their invariable wrong-headedness.

Fundamentally, “the idea of Barbados” faces enormous challenges from the process of globalisation and its attendant discontents. Globalisation facilitates an increasing homogenisation of culture propagated by a dominant cultural imperialism. Globalisation is impatient of “localization”, but the idea of Barbados strengthens the quest for a particular space within a wider universalism. This dialectical engagement between “the local” and “the global” does not necessarily presage an undermining of the idea of Barbados, but an enrichment of it. Still, it is a challenging endeavour. We must have faith that the idea of Barbados will endure, but faith is made complete or perfect with deeds.

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