

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Encouraging change through civil society

In recent months, the voice of Caribbean civil society has been coming to the fore in ways that challenge or bypass politicians, the political class and traditional politics.

Whether in relation to the environment, the abuse of human rights, freedom of speech or on gender issues, well founded if sometimes small national groups have been raising difficult issues in ways that are beginning to bring about change. In some cases they are doing so in collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from outside the region, or are being spurred into action by reports produced by international agencies or foreign governments.

The effect is to remind those in the region who feel that the old ways and a lack of accountability are best, that if the Caribbean wishes to prosper in an increasingly transparent global society, local voices need to be taken greater notice of; and that what once were solely domestic issues are now likely to come to the attention of investors, governments and activists in other parts of the world.

News and comment are now instant and global, and twenty-four hour rolling news channels, social media and the internet, have enabled cross-border citizen activism.

Caribbean governments, as I have noted before, for the most part, seem transfixed by this, unable to respond in real time, or to recognise that opinions and news items on YouTube or Twitter can go viral in hours, and that their traditional and often pedestrian response, let alone an entrenched desire to brush aside bad news, is no longer adequate.

This year the number of actions by Caribbean NGOs has multiplied.

For example in Jamaica, the Jamaica Environmental Trust and other environmental and civil society groups have challenged Chinese proposals to establish a much needed US\$1.5 billion investment in a transshipment port and related industrial zone, without an impact study or public consultations; matters on which government has now made it clear it will act. In Grenada, local activists and the international NGO, Reporters Without Borders, have questioned an electronic crimes act which, in part, has the potential to shut down debate using social media. In the Dominican Republic, national and international NGOs have begun to raise concern about a court decision that has the effect of making stateless tens of thousands of mainly Haitian individuals born since 1929 who have been living and working there. In Belize, earlier this year, local activists working with an international network of lawyers halted the offshore search for oil. And in the Bahamas, national, and US-based groups have raised serious questions about the treatment of prisoners held at a detention centre for migrants.

What each of these actions indicates, irrespective of the rights or wrongs of a particular issue, is that governments in open societies, located at the centre of the western hemisphere, cannot expect to behave as they might have done in the past, but need to be prepared to be challenged and expect reputational damage if no account is taken of local concerns, malfeasance or extra-judicial acts.

This is particularly important if the region is to retain its educated young people who think differently and who want their voices to be better heard on a wide range of issues that they feel that no political party any longer adequately represents.

Their views embrace practical concerns about the environment, the need for employment, a return to free education, and the continuing provision of social welfare at reasonable cost. They also want greater corporate morality, greater attention being paid to justice and human rights, an end to the excesses of the market and share a view that many in government have lost their commitment to service and see high office as a way to exercise and retain status and power.

Their views reflect a malaise that so far no political party has been able to address. This is because many young people are politicised, but apolitical in the sense of Party. They are for the most part cynical about established politics and largely beyond the appeal of the traditional left-right divide that has been enshrined in the Caribbean and across the world.

They are the new face of globalisation and are a signal and a challenge to politicians whether they are in the Caribbean, Europe or North America as they represent large numbers of young adults who have been happy to aspire to a post-Cold War consensus that education will bring employment, enable an escape from poverty, provide satisfaction and an upwardly mobile place within society.

In the Caribbean, however, what higher and tertiary education now seems to mean for many, is the opportunity to escape, to leave behind, often reluctantly, the country and region of their birth to travel to North America or to Europe to find opportunity within nations in which they are valued and where opportunity is substantial.

The tribalism of Caribbean party politics holds less and less appeal to newer generations accustomed through satellite television to observing other ways of conducting their lives. Their concern is how to remove the sense of alienation that exists among many under the age of thirty five, and about how to find new ways to participate in society.

In recent years governments have sought to achieve a new societal consensus by trying to engage through fora which enable the views of groups within the community to be taken into account in public decision making. This is an approach beloved by international institutions which suggest that by so doing the process becomes cohesive and the people that such bodies represent come to own policy.

While the idea of genuinely involving civil society in a Caribbean dialogue that leads to policy change is to be welcomed, the reality is that such consultations seem to count for very little and are set aside if inconvenient.

To address the issues that are now being voiced through Caribbean NGOs and pressure groups requires much more. It would seem to involve finding new ways to involve individuals and especially younger people in collectivism in a manner that does not diminish their individuality; requires finding new ways to develop a sense that more than the wealthy and successful can participate in decision making; requires the media to be more professional and less compliant; and for politicians to be honest, more committed personally and less seduced by power.

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