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ASSESSING THE WESTMINSTER MODEL IN THE CARIBBEAN

by Peter Lyn René

February contains the most celebrations of independence for Caribbean nations than any other month in the year: four. Grenada celebrated forty-three years of independence on February 7th; Saint Lucia celebrated thirty-eight years of independence on February 22nd; Guyana celebrated forty-seven years as a republic on February 23rd; and The Dominican Republic celebrated one hundred seventy-three years of independence on February 27th. With the exception of The Dominican Republic, these nations are all former colonies of the United Kingdom, who upon their independence adopted the Westminster model as their form of government. Given the plethora of independence celebrations in February, it seemed a fitting time to revisit and evaluate the Westminster model in the Caribbean.

Since gaining independence from The United Kingdom 1962-1980, many of the English-speaking islands in the Caribbean, specifically the twelve nations that form The Caribbean Community (CARICOM), adopted the British Westminster form of government. Nevertheless, independence for these former British colonies was not truly about independence. Girvan (2015) observed that “independence was about the entrenchment of the two-Party system...and preservation of the laws, institutions, and symbols of the colonial state.” These former colonies are now member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Queen Elizabeth remains head of state and represented by a



Governor-General whose role is mainly ceremonial. This form of government has a strong executive, the Prime Minister, in which almost all power lies. As the head of the ruling party, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet of Ministers are the government.

The region is now over fifty years removed from its marches to independence; however, little is left of the original Westminster model except a surreal alteration of the original model. Globalization has also led to departures of the original intent of the model; it also created circumstances that have led to worsening conditions for the people: wide-spread government corruption and the raiding of the general funds by office holders and their stooges; a lack of transparency and the huge effects of invisible money donations in political campaigns; the literally unchecked powers of the executive; and weakness, lack of power or influence of local governments. Is the Westminster form of government still the best option for the former British colonies? Should the region seek to replace and or reform Westminster?

Independence in the Commonwealth Caribbean saw the birth of a the two-party system that took hold and became so engrained into these new societies, that some of its citizens placed party affiliation above love of country. What was also striking was how the Westminster model maintained the laws, foundations and symbols of colonialism. “Louis Lindsay concluded that the formal granting of the right of self-determination to traditionally devalued peoples of the Afro-Asian and Caribbean world was accompanied by devaluation of the meaning of independence itself” (Girvan, 2015). Independence as not the benign act it may appear to have been; rather it was appeasement to blunt any strategies by leaders of these nations to rebel against colonialism in an all-out revolution resulting in emancipation for their people.



Research indicates that there is a growing number of scholars who believe that the Westminster model is harmful to the former British colonies. Consensus continue to grow supporting the idea of reforming the Westminster model or to replace it with a more centralized democratic form of government that will convincingly guarantee and protect the civil rights and liberties of its people. In a speech to the Barbados Chamber of Commerce in 2013, then Saint Lucia's Prime Minister Dr. Kenny Anthony observed what has become the consensus among some authors critical of the Westminster model: that it has caused the biggest crisis since independence. "How our societies crawl out of this vicious vortex of persistent low growth, crippling debt, huge fiscal deficits and high unemployment is the single most important question facing us at this time" (Edmonds, 2013, para. 3).

One of the chief critics and Westminster scholar was the late Professor Norman Girvan who was among the earliest of critics of the short-comings of the Westminster model. Girvan viewed this model more as an "independence pact" used by the British government as a way to maintain ties to the region with old colonial laws, traditions and way of life, while giving the appearance of independence to the former Caribbean colonies. Girvan cited that "the implanting of colonial ways of thinking into native elites was one of the outstanding successes of British policy in the Caribbean. It was key to the entrenchment of Westminster government in the soon-to-be-independent." Another examination of the Westminster model shows the Caribbean's post-colonial past has yield little change that compelled these Caribbean nations to seek their independence from The United Kingdom over fifty years ago. Hinds (2008) stated that "formal democracy in the Caribbean however, has not been matched by an evolution of



substantive democracy whereby political, ethnic, and socioeconomic equality have emerged as central components of the region's political culture.”

Jamaica gained its independence from the United Kingdom on August 6, 1962, and was the first colony to engage the “independence pact”. However, the Jamaican government had an issue with being a sovereign nation while retaining a British monarch as its head of state. The time had come for Jamaican independence and many felt that it made little sense to be an independent nation while still swearing allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Her Heirs and Successors. The draft of the Constitution was presumed to be provided by the Colonial Office (a government department of the Kingdom of Great Britain and later of the United Kingdom, first created to deal with the colonial affairs of British North America but needed also to oversee the increasing number of colonies of the British Empire) and thus making it difficult to view Jamaica as an independent state. The Constitution begins with these words: “At the Court in [Buckingham Palace](#).” There was nothing in the document noting the sovereignty of the people...nor social and economic rights in this original version of the Constitution.

Jamaican independence began a renaissance for the Caribbean as other colonies followed and gained their independence. The main concern for the British and their colonies request for independence was how best to avoid anti-colonial uprisings that would take the form of revolutions against British rule. Therefore, independence and the assistance the British provided the former colonies in creating their constitutions therefore became more of a psychological self-emancipation of the colonized people and the transformation of the institutions and structures of colonial rule into an illusion of independence and self-rule.



While democracy has flourished under Westminster in the Commonwealth Caribbean, many of the stable democracies of the region has been damaged beyond repair by widespread corruption and challenges from the ruling governments on matters such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press with several countries engaging in censorship of the media. Further, Caribbean democracies can easily be derailed if widespread corruption is adequately addressed. There is a need to put additional mechanisms in place to ensure greater freedom of the press. These democracies must also be strengthened to prevent a reversal of democracy. Because of the declining Westminster model, calls for constitutional reforms continue to grow louder. Barrow-Giles (2011) noted that “the politics of money has replaced the politics of ideas, freedom, democracy, sovereignty and national self-determination. In this context, men of ideas, skill, talent, honesty and true ability count for very little.”

The Caribbean remains one of the few parts of the world yet to enact or pass meaningful legislation to govern election finances. None of the English-speaking Caribbean islands has any laws that govern financing of political campaigns or an apparatus that would disclose the sources of political funding, be it was public or private sources. As a result, scandals have continued to occur. But perhaps one of the biggest issues causing harm to the region is the lack of willingness by government to propose and / or enact constitutional reform; after all that would mean passing legislation that will directly reduce or curtail some of their powers. Currently, heads of government are more likely to abuse their powers, violate the constitution meanwhile fully amercing themselves in their discretionary powers. “A new genre of politician has emerged, whose skills set is no different from that of the petty thief and average con man. It is such persons that voters now find attractive” (Barrow-Giles, 2011).

The Commonwealth Caribbean is restless as cries for constitutional reforms grows. Barbados and Jamaica indicates a desire to leave the Commonwealth and replace Queen Elizabeth II with a President who will be a more ceremonial role while the Prime Minister would continue to run the government. As early as 2015, Barbados stated that it could remove the Queen as head of state, 400 years after it was colonized by Britain. Prime Minister Freundel Stuart said initially that he planned to make Barbados a republic by November 2016. He stated that it did not make sense to have a monarch as head of state of a free and independent country. “It is a little awkward in the year 2015 to still have to stand up and instead of pledging allegiance to Barbados to be pledging allegiance to ‘her majesty the queen’” (Spence, 2015). For Jamaica, the sentiments are the same. Former Prime Minister Michael Manley, feeling a strong sense of pride and allegiance to the Caribbean social background and lush history, balked at the notion of maintaining symbols of sovereignty; he urged the Jamaican government to move towards becoming a republic. In August 2015, Saint Lucia’s Parliament discussed the report of the Constitutional Review Commission. The report recommended divisions of power and in particular, the election of Senators by the people; the report included a recommendation of the country becoming a republic.

A consistent element with Small Island Nations (SIDS) in the Caribbean is the almost universal strangulation of debt. The combined debt burden of these SIDS are almost twice that of Latin America. Monies are not generated in these local economies due to limited natural resources and borrowing internationally is no longer a viable option because these countries are not creditworthy. Girvan (2015) said: “When you can no longer service the debt, you have no recourse but to the IMF. That means budget cuts,



further depletion of resources to fight crime, to adapt to climate change, build up your human and physical capital, and pay your teachers and policemen adequately.”

Girvan’s body of work on the need for reform of the Westminster model support the sentiments in recent years of countries in the Commonwealth Caribbean who continue to grow weary of a monarch serving as head of state of their country. Much of the issues plaguing the region revolves around this model. In fact, though independence was granted to these nations, island officials had little to no input on the constitution, which was written for them by oligarchs and elites. “...the Anglophone Caribbean were not the products of the ‘collective self’ but were perceived as ‘received’ instruments from former colonial masters, fundamentally illegitimate, of subjection to imposition from without” (Garvin, 2015).

Happy belated Independence Day to Grenada, Saint Lucia and The Dominican Republic; Happy belated Republic Day to Guyana. All the best.



About The Author

Peter Lyn René has Bachelors in Political Science and a Masters in Law and Public Policy, and is currently a candidate for a Doctor of Philosophy in Law and Public Policy degree. He is the Chairman, and CEO of The Caribbean American Heritage Foundation of Texas. He has an extensive background in Non-Profit Administration and Management, and Information Technology Project Management. He is a Consultant in Houston, Texas. René is a Mediator having completed courses in Basic Mediation and Advance Family and Divorce Mediation in 2010, and is certified to mediate cases in the Justice of the Peace Courts, the County Courts, and the State District Courts as well. He volunteers his time mediating cases for the Harris County Dispute Resolution Center and has successfully mediated dozens of cases. He is also the Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer of The Singing From The Soul Foundation. He serves on the Executive Committee of the United Nations Council of Organizations. René can be contacted at peter@renechronicles.com.



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