

Response to Peter Wickham's Feeble Response

In his Nation Newspaper reply of Wednesday, 8th July 2009 titled 'Yep, Do Nothing!' in response to my article that appeared in a redacted form in the Nation Newspaper edition of Wednesday, 1st July 2009 and in the full version in the Barbados Advocate edition of Sunday, 5th July 2009, Mr. Peter Wickham made the useful distinction between different types of public opinion. However, he mangled the articulation of the distinction; hence his feeble response.

There are at least two types of public opinion; one type that is based on an embedded or entrenched set of societal values and another that reflects changes in trends. The first type of public opinion changes very slowly, and the second can change rather quickly. For Barbados we will cite two examples of the first type and one example of the second.

Barbados has chosen to cling to the eleven plus examination as the method for determining the placement of students in secondary schools. A dispassionate analysis of that system would indicate that it would be far better for the society if all students attended secondary schools in close proximity to their places of residence. The maintenance of the system, however, reflects the aspirations of parents that their children should have a shot at attending Harrison College, or Combermere, or Queen's College. The views of those parents are based on an embedded value system that assigns status to children who attend the top schools and that also confers some recognition on the parents of those children.

Our second example of the first type of public opinion deals with housing. Most Barbadians have aspirations of owning their piece of the rock. Those aspirations also reflect an entrenched value system that says that ownership of a nice home is equivalent to success in one's chosen field of endeavour.

For the second type of public opinion we consider the way individuals dress. Changes in fashion every five or ten years constitute a constant theme in Western society. However, what is so surprising about these changes is that even some of the most conservative individuals, or their children, adopt the changing trends. Some of the fashion trends have been criticised on various

grounds, e.g., they show too much skin, but nevertheless they gain general acceptance by broad swaths of society.

My contention on the immigration issue is therefore quite straightforward. Public opinion on the immigration issue is not based on an embedded value system, and given a clear enunciation of the societal problems posed by an unacceptably high number of undocumented immigrants in Barbados, the position adopted in 2009 by the majority of the public would be different to that adopted in 2005. The reasoning is simple. The general public, when confronted with a situation that has the potential to lead to decreases in their welfare or to erode their standard of living, will opt for corrective action even if they held earlier but different views that were not based on perfect, or almost perfect, information. In addition, Barbados is a small country, and given the will, finding and removing illegal immigrants is a walk in the park. All that is needed are the right incentives.

Lastly, we Economists accept that the greater the number of policy tools available to address a particular problem, the greater are your chances of success. Hence, your assertion that, “Like me, Prime Minister Thompson knows that the effective way to end illegal migration here would be to make it a criminal offence to employ, rent property to, or in any other way facilitate an illegal immigrant in Barbados,” can charitably be described as simplistic.

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