



Lead, CARICOM, lead!

Guest Column



by David Comissiong

ARTICLE 6 of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas commits the 15 Member States of our Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to "enhanced coordination of Member States' foreign and foreign economic policies" and to "the achievement of a greater measure of.....effectiveness in dealing with third States, groups of States and entities of any description."

Well, if our Caribbean Community (CARICOM) ever needed a unified and collective foreign policy, the time is now!

Recently - on the 10th of January 2019 - we had an embarrassing spectacle at the Organization of American States (OAS), when, on having to deal with a Resolution that purported to delegitimize the inauguration of Nicolas Maduro as President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, our CARICOM member states found themselves divided on the issue, with some of them voting for the Resolution, others voting against, and some abstaining.

And now, an additional Venezuela-related foreign policy challenge has come our way, in the form of one Juan Guaido - the recently appointed President of Venezuela's National Assembly - unilaterally (and in the absence of his participation in any relevant electoral process) declaring himself President of Venezuela and having the Donald Trump administration of the United States of America purporting to recognize him as Venezuela's interim President.

In light of the foregoing, it behooves us to spend some time reflecting on the genesis of CARICOM's aspiration to a collective foreign policy, and on the ideals and principles that would have guided the four major architects of that aspiration - the late Prime Ministers Errol Barrow, Eric Williams, Forbes Burnham, and Michael Manley.

And so, let us commence our story at the very beginning :

In January 1962, at the 8th Consultative Meeting of Organization of American States (OAS) Foreign Ministers in Uruguay, the OAS suspended Cuba's membership, thereby effectively expelling Cuba from the OAS!

This was then followed by the US compiling a so-called "blacklist" of all countries still trading with Cuba and threatening to cut off US economic and military assistance to them.

But even this was seemingly not enough for the anti-Cuba forces, and during the 9th Consultative Meeting of Foreign Ministers held in Washington DC in July 1964, a resolution was passed urging all governments of the Western Hemisphere to break diplomatic relations with Cuba.

And, sad to say, in the following years every single Western Hemisphere nation except Mexico and Canada fell in line with the OAS stipulation and either broke diplomatic relations with Cuba or refused to recognize the

revolutionary Republic of Cuba!

The magnificent response of the visionary Prime Ministers of the four newly independent Commonwealth Caribbean nations - Errol Barrow, Michael Manley, Eric Williams and Forbes Burnham - was to issue the following historic Declaration in October 1972:-

"The Prime Ministers of Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, meeting together during the Heads of Government Conference at Chaguaramas, have considered the state of their relations with the Government of Cuba and the obligations which the OAS has sought to impose upon its members in regard to relations with that Government; and make the following statement:

(1) The independent English-speaking Caribbean states, exercising their sovereign right to enter into relations with any other sovereign state and pursuing their determination to seek regional solidarity and to achieve meaningful and comprehensive economic cooperation amongst all Caribbean countries will seek the early establishment of relations with Cuba, whether economic, diplomatic or both.

(2) To this end, the independent English-speaking Caribbean states will act together on the basis of agreed principles."

Here then were the four smallest and youngest states of the entire Western hemisphere standing on principle; courageously speaking "truth to power"; and setting a noble and principled example for all the other nations of the hemisphere to follow!

Let us now proceed to an examination of the ideals and principles that animated the thought and actions of each one of these four important leaders of our Caribbean integration movement when they issued that historic Declaration.

MICHAEL MANLEY

In his 1982 book entitled "Jamaica: Struggle in the Periphery", Michael Manley explained his thinking as follows:-

"Our strong opposition to any infringement upon the sovereignty of a small nation and its rights was to lead us to the most controversial single aspect of our foreign policy. This was our friendship with and consistent defence of Cuba and her right to normal, unfettered membership of that part of the family of nations which occupies the western hemisphere....."

"For me the question of Cuba's relationship with the United States goes to the heart of the question of the kind of world Jamaica can occupy with pride, with independence and with success in the future. No such prospect exists for a country like Jamaica as long as it is possible for the United States to continue to bully, to ostracize, to exert pressure against, to blockade Cuba....As far as I am concerned, Cuba represents a non-negotiable point of

principle about the kind of world in which we live....."

"The Cuba issue is simply this: if the United States has the right to exert this pressure against Cuba, what are our rights as a sovereign nation? What is our security, should we ever do anything to cause the displeasure of the powers that be in the United States? So far as I am concerned, to back away from the principled and friendly relationship with Cuba was to admit failure at the start. That friendship was maintained in spite of the wide differences in political organization and social and economic objectives between Cuba and ourselves."

ERIC WILLIAMS

Even before issuing the historic October 1972 Declaration, Prime Minister Eric Williams had made his thinking about recognition of Cuba absolutely clear in a 3rd February 1970 speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Inter-American Economic and Social Council:-

"Adherence to the principle of hemispheric economic solidarity logically impels us to one further step. I refer to a consideration of the controversial question of the resumption of economic relations with Cuba. May I remind you that....in the 1970s we should have learned the lesson that economic boycott is not the most realistic nor indeed the most productive attitude to be adopted with a country whose economic and social system we do not share....."

"At all events, within the family of nations of the hemisphere, reconciliation with the estranged is the ineluctable choice, rather than ostracism."

ERROL BARROW

A mere six months after the issuance of the historic Declaration Prime Minister Barrow gave an insight into his thought processes in his 19th of April 1973 address to the Empire Club of Toronto, Canada, as follows:-

"...we have managed in our four countries, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Barbados to sustain our independence to the extent that we were considered to have committed an act of defiance in October last year when we took a lead in the western hemisphere in deciding to open diplomatic relations with the Republic of Cuba, much to the chagrin of our neighbours to the north.

"But it demonstrates that the developing countries can take a lead in conditioning the minds of people who should know better.....And I have no doubt that the other countries which are mightier and more powerful than the four small independent countries in the Caribbean will soon shamefacedly or not, have to follow suit..."

"We cannot sit down in the Caribbean and wait for our strategy to be dictated or governed by the political or other economic or

social prejudices of people in other countries because to entertain such a belief would be an abandonment of the sovereignty that we believe in and we have never subscribed to the doctrine of limited sovereignty. And I have been, myself, very firm right from the beginning of Barbados' independence that we would be friends of all and satellites of none."

FORBES BURNHAM

The ideological foundation upon which the then Guyanese Prime Minister - Forbes Burnham - would have based his decision to establish diplomatic and economic relations with revolutionary Cuba may be gleaned from the following extracts taken from two of Mr Burnham's most important speeches:-

"Either we weld ourselves into a regional grouping serving primarily Caribbean needs, or, lacking a common policy, have our various territories and nations drawn hither and thither into, and by, other larger groupings, where ...we become the objects of neo-colonial exploitation, and achieve the pitiable status of international mendicants.....This is the naked truth."

(14th August 1967 speech to the Conference of Commonwealth Caribbean officials in Georgetown, Guyana)

"The Government and people of Guyana recognize that the struggle in those parts of the yet politically un-emancipated countries of Africa, the struggles of the black people in the United States of America, the struggles of the people in the Caribbean to own and control their countries at the economic level, are all part of one major struggle of the black man in the world today...."

"Right down, deep down, it's the struggle of people like all of us...to be men; to control and own what is ours."

(24th February 1970 speech at the Pan-African Seminar in Georgetown, Guyana)

And so, the lesson taught to us by these architects of our Caribbean integration movement- Errol Barrow, Eric Williams, Forbes Burnham and Michael Manley - is absolutely clear: namely, that our Caribbean Community (CARICOM) is a much more effective, powerful, principled, and respected organization when it operates on the basis of a unified, collective Foreign Policy!

Surely, this is a lesson that we all need to take to heart in these troubled and vexed times.

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