



The Errol Barrow Memorial Lecture

“Barrow’s Legacy – A New Vision”

by

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at the

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Chairman of the Lecture Organising committee, President, Executive Council and the General Council of the Democratic Labour Party, fellow Barbadians at home and in the diaspora, greetings, on this Errol Barrow Day.

Thank you for that far too generous an introduction.

I believe it is was Mark Twain, who once said that he could live for two months on a good compliment.

Given your introduction, I may be assured a long life.

Though praise, faint or high, can often be comfort for a fool.

I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to return to George Street having many years ago delivered a lunchtime lecture to launch my book on international economic law.

It was to the DLP's credit back then that I could walk into George Street and provide a blistering critique of its policies. I recall the story making the back page of the Nation newspaper.

You can only imagine my surprise to have been invited back to speak at George Street.

And not just back, but to deliver this prestigious memorial lecture, bearing the name of your founder and the Father of Independence of Barbados.

I should single out the Chairman of the organizing committee for tonight's event for their courage.

By the end of the night, I hope to meet the challenge put before me, or it will be the Swan song for both of us.

Either way, we are both here for our country.

Those who can use their voice should never stand shy of critics.

In that spirit, let us be called to have, Grace under fire.

As a member of the UWI Cave Hill, it is only fitting for me to start this Errol Barrow Memorial Lecture, by recalling Barrow's key principles on the UWI, given that he was instrumental in setting up the UWI at Cave Hill.

Barrow tasked the university with public engagement at the national and Caribbean level. He stated that the;

“University must move from the confines of the campus and more into the heart of the communities that constitute our region.”

Barrow also provided the tool for the university to carry out its important role of public engagement.

In what amounts to a robust defense of academic freedom, Barrow stated that the;

“... university must never be restricted, impeded, or harassed for fulfilling its intellectual function of introducing its students, critically and honestly to the great body of ideas which constitute the storehouse of human knowledge... [and he stated that he or any Government he was part of would] never circumscribe the University by demanding that the members of its staff should subscribe to some form of conventional wisdom or be uncritical of the government itself.”

Therefore, I see this lecture as part of the solemn duty that the UWI was tasked with, by none other than the person instrumental in giving life to the university.

I am therefore honoured to deliver this lecture as has been done by many UWI colleagues before me.

It is well known that Barrow left the Barbados Labour and formed the Democratic Labour Party in 1955.

What we tend to forget about this story is that Barrow was doing this in the shadow of the incomparable titan that was the Grand Old Man, Grantley Adams of the Barbados Labour Party.

Barrow, having assessed that the Barbados Labour Party was not moving at the pace required to meet the challenges that Barbados faced at that time made the decision and acted to form the new party, the Democratic Labour Party.

He was brazen.

He was unbowed.

This is a fine example of living by your principles, if ever we needed one.

Today, it is perhaps easy to forget what a herculean task Barrow faced in trying to forge a new independent nation out of a plantation society, not far removed historically and in real time, from slavery. As he said on the verge of independence in 1966 and it is still a task we need to engage with today,

“the soul of this community has to be laid bare, and there is no better time, to do that then when we are preparing for independence, so that we know what we are, who we are and where we are going.”

What was Barrow’s vision?

I think it was best summed up by Barrow himself, in 1986;

“I tell you what kind of mirror image I have of you, or what the Democratic Party has of you. The Democratic Labour Party has an image that the people of Barbados would be able to run their own affairs, to pay for the cost of running their own country, to have an education system which is as good as what can be obtained in any industrialized country, anywhere in the world.”

I would add to this that Barrow's vision for Barbados was to be underwritten by the delivery of social justice for Barbadians. As he stated [in 1987];

“Social justice cannot be achieved in a society where there is inequality and discrimination either at the work place or outside of it. Social justice cannot co-exist with hunger and unemployment.”

Barrow's contribution to the development of Barbados, his legacy if you prefer that word, can be situated in the stages of the development of Barbados.

In broad strokes, these stages of development can be categorized as follows:

- Grantley Adams: self-government and provision of welfare in the 1950s.
- Barrow: full independence and free education in the 1960s to create a black middle class, economic diversification from sugar to tourism, and the development of light manufacturing.
- Tom Adams: infrastructural modernization, and along with expansion in the tourism sector that Barrow initiated, Adams would add the international business sector.

- Arthur: economic pragmatism and quest at poverty reduction, which actually harks back to Barrow's own economic pragmatism, which still defines the current stage of Barbados's development.

At each stage, whether a Barbados Labour Party or Democratic Labour Party government, there has been an emphasis on maintaining the social goods of universal access to education and health, and the provision of basic welfare.

It can serve willful political interests to promote a counter narrative, but generally the political and socio-economic development of Barbados appears essentially as some sort of continuous process of development.

The Best-dos Santos Public Health Laboratory, being a recent example, having been conceptualised and built by one government, and employed to its maximum capacity during the Covid pandemic, by another government.

What we therefore realise is that new visions or ideas for Barbados are part of the continuous, or stages of the development of Barbados, or in more formal terms, the historical pattern of socio-economic and political growth of Barbados.

Despite the fire of electoral politics, often more heat than light, Barbados has never been a country for revolution as such, but more of quiet change, sometimes frustratingly so.

Historian Gordon K Lewis observed in 1968 and still probably apt today in many ways that it;

“would require a fidel-ista hurricane to change Barbados overnight. It remains, despite the Democratic Labour Party “wind of change” a mixture of class privilege, genteel respectability and [Trollopian] institutional conservatism, with a new element of intruding American wealth.”

Lewis was to also describe the approach to public discussions by the Barbadian middle class as retreating to the;

“secrecy of home life, for their public expressions are still hesitant, constituting”, a “series of angry mutterings behind closed doors”.

This he said was the well-known Barbadian middle-class tactic of withdrawal.

Perhaps social media allows for this tactic in our modern context through WhatsApp chats or private social media groups.

I am no social historian so I will leave further observations to my colleagues at the UWI.

What I can say is that even if we assess change as a continuation or stages of development, any new vision for Barbados does not need to be trapped by the legacy of any person or political party, because over time the challenges and the solutions are simply not the same.

The late Harold Hoyte, former editor of the Nation newspaper, perhaps sets out the best approach to engaging in political legacy and in particular, Barrow's legacy.

Hoyte was speaking to the Democratic Labour Party but the approach can be broadened for how Barbados can approach Barrow or any political legacy.

He stated that;

“The DLP [and Barbados] should not hang on to [Barrow's] coat tail indefinitely, for as a political party [and a country] gets older it must rely less on its past [for future success], [and] adopt an appropriate strategy for the times we are in today as [Barrow] did then for his times.”

In today's context, Barrow can be mood music, but not necessarily the main tune.

I will now briefly assess the challenges Barbados, we, face as a country and importantly try to make a few suggestions of how Barbados can address those challenges as part of a vision towards the continuing development of Barbados.

We may ask ourselves as did a former Prime Minister Sandiford; how did we get here?

Suffice to say we all know the current state of our country.

More importantly at this time is how do we develop from here.

The Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) estimated that slightly above a third of Barbadians (33.7 per cent) are multidimensionally deprived.

Barbados does not only have issues with inequality as to wealth but also in our education system. For example, research shows that the majority of prison inmates come from eight of the lowest ranked secondary schools in Barbados.

These children from the same multidimensionally deprived households are not only failed by the education system but the legal system that incarcerates them, essentially, for the household they were born into.

On income concentration, for example, in tourism, our main industry, 47 per cent of all the rooms available in traditional hotels are owned by eight people.

This means that the key economic driver in our society is controlled by a small group of people, who may be able to extract concessions and promote their interest.

It was also estimated that by 1970 the top 10 per cent of landowners owned 77 per cent of the land in Barbados.

Data on income and wealth distribution can be hard to come by, but the picture seems to be a mix of multidimensional deprivation for a significant number of people and wealth convergence at the top of Barbadian society.

Government after government, small pockets of our society are enriched.

A look at the Global Competitiveness Index paints the picture of a private sector that remains underdeveloped, retail driven and dependent on government procurement, subsidies or concessions.

The working class and working poor remain despondent, and the middle-class struggle to carry the burden of taxation.

Therefore, I find it interesting that Barbadians are willing to engage in discussions of US and UK Black Lives Matter, but this is almost farcical unless we face up to our own issues of inequality and tackle that soul of the country that was supposedly laid bare at independence by Barrow.

What I have just outlined are some of the challenges, that will be worsened by Covid.

Challenges that are the crux of the development of Barbados as we try to build a more equal society.

Broadly, there have been three components in the Barbados tool kit to respond to challenges of a socio-economic nature.

These have included structural adjustment, privatization and engagement of foreign capital, either by a stimulation of tourism and high-end real estate, or by borrowing from the international market.

There is usually a bitter political debate about going to the IMF after reserves are run down, followed by denial about going to the IMF, then the government goes to the IMF, the reserves are built up again when coupled with some sort of global economic upswing for the government of the day to ride.

Covid has however shattered the cozy consensus of the political class on how to respond to the current challenges that Barbados faces.

This time is different and the usual levers we would pull to respond to a crisis are not available.

Barbados is already in a structural adjustment programme with the IMF and is straight-jacketed with what some commentators have assessed as ambitious deficit reduction targets in this Covid environment, when other countries are borrowing to spend.

Tourism has been devastated and peoples' livelihoods shattered by job losses.

And there appears little appetite for privatization when potential buyers are pressed for resources.

Therefore, we have to get creative with the solutions to the challenges we face, on various fronts, and be willing to just try something new.

Surely the response and vision for the development of Barbados in the context of Covid, cannot simply be survival, muddling through and half measures of a move towards republicanism to renew the Barbadian spirit.

Especially if that attempt at constitutional and political renewal is unaccompanied by changes such as term-limits for Prime Ministers, Ministerial Codes of Conduct, Freedom of Information Act, Integrity laws, Campaign Finance laws, Anti-corruption laws.

Though the context of independence for Barrow and the context of Covid for us now are different, the parallels may be instructive.

A Barbados challenged to change economically and politically; and to acquire a new or renewed sense of purpose.

If we consider that one of the main roles of government is to provide a high-quality education -- simply, tearing up the common entrance exam, cannot be the core of a vision or attempt to further Barrow's original vision to democratize education and eliminate inequalities based on fees.

Removing the common entrance exam does not address the inequality of wealth distribution we have in this country. There is no denying that education can be a way to help persons build wealth and have better life opportunities.

My biggest fear is that the abolition of the common entrance exam, if not carefully handled could be a missed opportunity for not addressing other social problems, at the heart of which is the need to address inequality and provide for a new generation of economically enfranchised Barbadians.

The matter of development in education becomes more acute when we conclude that the biggest reform of education, EduTech, to introduce technology into Barbadian schools appeared to have started and stalled as there was no successive building on the premise beyond having computers in schools which Covid has revealed never was fully manifested in a sustainable way.

I believe that every school in Barbados does not need to offer the same educational programme.

We can introduce a range of schools. Keep some grammar schools with a modified common entrance exam to cover other subjects in arts, sciences and languages, to address transfer to those schools. And introduce International Baccalaureate schools and academies of excellence in certain areas.

The idea overall is to give power to parents to decide what type of school their children should go to and also prepare children for jobs beyond the traditional professions.

Providing free education was monumental for Barbados. But it was one size fits all.

Now to have options besides the common entrance and different types of public schools not following the same program of education – that could be the next step.

In contrast, there are spaces where the government should be less involved or more dynamic with its role, so it can focus on priority areas such as education.

The question of the role or purpose of government in business is therefore one we have to answer, not necessarily as Barrow did, but in a way that works for the now.

Barrow stated that;

“...we intend to put an end to the practice whereby publicly-owned enterprises, producing non-strategic goods and services are permitted to operate at a substantial loss with little likelihood of ever making a profit.”

I propose that government should function as business and a social enterprise.

It is without a doubt that controlling the public purse is a difficult job and government should concentrate on the provision of key social services in education and health for the on-going development of Barbados, and make it easy for people to get on with the business of business and in creating jobs.

I think that government needs to get out of its own way, or rather mercurial politicians need to get out of the way, so that the parts of government that can function and make money, do exactly that.

This is instead of government and its machinery being used for artificial short-term ends by politicians handing out jobs or piecemeal short-term projects.

For example, should governments be engaged in boys on the block programmes, some of which placate that group until the next hand out, or should government provide real opportunities for our young people, recognizing that the boys on the block and the university student are experiencing the same angst about opportunities and their place in the world, but university creates opportunities for one set of young people, while we give hand-outs to another set of young people.

The parts of government and statutory corporations with money making potential should open themselves as a space for entrepreneurship and for innovation, for opportunities from technical to the more traditional areas.

For example, arrangements to contract out public services to various competitors or allowing the use of government owned facilities, to provide for the creative industry to make exportable goods such as movies and tv-shows and entertainment shows.

There is no point in having state of the art government facilities, such as the CBC tv studios, which are not fully used, but are financed by taxpayer's money without capitalizing on their 'money making' ability.

Government can also use its procurement and purchasing power to drive innovation in the local market with a view to encourage export of products or services.

Government can also provide the framework to support scientists and tech entrepreneurs. How can we do this? One way could be to create Centres of Excellence and provide the appropriate fiscal incentives to attract Bajan talent back to Barbados or for Bajan talent to stay in Barbados.

By rationalizing existing governmental agencies, we can start with something practical, such as reorganising the Facilitation Unit for Returning Nationals (FURN) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade (which was renamed the Barbados Network Programme). Reorganized and some functions of other development agencies such as BIDC and Invest Barbados rationalised as a new Barbados Centre for Innovation.

This is what I mean when I say think and act as Government as Business and Social Enterprise. It is about finding ways to open new spaces for jobs and for development.

A new role for the Centre would be to actively attract and facilitate young Barbadians living overseas, and even international talent, to move to Barbados to live, set up businesses and work.

The Centre can continue to administer the current tax breaks of the Unit for Returning Nationals in addition to any new tax breaks for young returning Barbadians or international talent partnering, whether through financing, technology transfers or knowledge-sharing, with small businesses or entrepreneurs already present in Barbados.

The Centre would not only be linked to Barbados' embassies and consulates as is the Unit for Returning Nationals, but the Centre would ensure that the embassies and consulates are active hubs for facilitating the export of Barbadian products and services.

Until we come to a new consensus on the role of government, we will continue to have fake debates and justifications about the size of government.

And miss tackling what the priorities of government should be, whether that be creation of global excellence in education, basically whatever we decide.

This is where leadership is key. And Barrow can be instructive here to us.

Barrow in his time had to be brutally blunt about the failing industry of sugar and the need for new industry. The only way to address it was head on. Barrow pioneered tourism.

We are at a juncture where that same directness has to be taken with the failing tourism sector.

Now, I will provide a brief history on tourism and the services sector in Barbados, to re-emphasize my earlier point that we situate Barrow within the stages of the development of Barbados.

Barrow's pragmatic economic approach to diversify the economy from sugar, accounting I believe for 80% of exports in the 1960s was to promote tourism and light manufacturing industry.

It was more about modernization than revolutionizing the socio-economic set up of Barbados regarding white ownership and control of the sugar industry and land at that time.

So, in 1969, Barrow initiated Operation Beehive launching the Barbados Industrial Development Corporation which attracted light industries and hotels to Barbados.

Tom Adams continued Barrow's approach, focusing during his tenure on attracting hi-tech multinational corporations such as Intel. Adams promoted the development of the international business sector situating Barbados as a competitive tax jurisdiction.

Owen Arthur was to add to tourism, a dimension of foreign direct investment in high end real estate, which was continued by Thompson and Stuart.

Therefore, Barbados essentially has had the same service sector based economic model that Barrow initiated, to pay our bills, albeit with added dimensions by successive leadership.

Arguably, have we had a new vision since Barrow, has an entire country been dining out on his legacy?

What can we try that is different? Two things come to mind.

One of those, a remote work visa, has already been implemented by the government after a public proposal by a private citizen Peter Lawrence Thompson reached the desk of the relevant authorities.

He deserves to be commended for willingly, openly and freely sharing his idea for the benefit of Barbados.

The idea is to shift from short term tourism to the long-term remote worker or digital nomad.

This is the sort of thinking that we need as we re-develop our tourism product.

The other idea is a service zone. When I talk about the service zone, I am not talking about a repeat of early pre- and post-independence industrialization by invitation and exclusive economic zones, which like tourism, can contribute significantly to economic growth, but did not contribute to economic development because there was no technological transfer and innovation.

The service zone is a physical space that can be a centre or hub for finance, banking, tech, shipping and arbitration. This is similar to what has been done in Dubai with the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), as a financial free

zone, which is a financial hub for the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, or the Shanghai a free trade zone and arbitration centre.

What does it require to set up a service zone? It requires its own set laws to govern the behaviour of people, businesses, in and outside the zone, and importantly ways to address disputes when the laws are broken. If my law and legal systems students are listening, I am sure discussions of the role of law, sound all too familiar.

What else is required? Properly designed incentive packages for more mature businesses and for start-ups. One size does not fit all. This should not be about simply giving tax breaks.

The development of large-scale projects must be tied to the development of social capital.

It is also not about necessarily building new edifices of concrete, and reducing our already limited green spaces, when existing areas could be revitalized and reimagined for such a zone.

A few other specifics about the zone as I see it. In addition to the zone having the rules to govern its existence, it will require regulatory authorities, commercial

courts and international arbitration bodies. Provision should be made to allow qualified international professionals to work in the service zone. That way we get to liberalise our professional services markets and attract new business and talent without necessarily compromising the local market or laws.

Further the service zone could be a place to test new financial products, for example provide a space where cryptocurrencies can be traded and be used to buy goods and services. It could also be a zone built on blockchain technology and to create new forms of electronic contracts.

What could be an interesting development is not merely the service zone but the regulatory framework that governs the zone. Along with English law and NY law, the service zone could also allow for example provide for the Shanghai Arbitration Center as a choice of arbitration for companies in the zone.

The point is that Barbados could possibly be a hub for Latin America and Caribbean arbitration as it relates to Chinese investment.

China is predicated by 2050 to be the world's economic leader. We cannot wait until 2050 to make decisions about how to capitalize on our relationship with China, it has to start now.

The service zone could have the potential to be the next thing in the services sector, providing jobs for traditional areas and also for new areas.

Madame Chair

I tried to set out some of the things we can do and some of the steps we can take towards continuing the development of Barbados.

What I have tried to show is that we need to focus on exactly what the role of government should be, continuing and enhancing the foundational priorities such as education, by putting more choice into the system; and by government getting out the way, and creating the framework for wealth creation and new service industries to pay for the foundational priorities of the country.

Governments should focus on the priorities and do them well, because in trying to do everything, governments may end up under delivering on these priorities.

At the core, what I believe in is greater economic enfranchisement for Barbadians, which ultimately is a continuation of Barrow's quest for social justice.

Everyone will not agree with everything, if any at all, of what I have said. That is part of public engagement.

What everyone is to realise is that not once did I suggest any new commissions, organizations that were not from existing organizations, no reports, no councils or no boards. As Barrow cautioned,

“what happens in the Caribbean is that when you have a good idea, either the British or American commercial interests kill the idea or the West Indian governments appoint committee after committee, or the civil servants are the main beneficiaries of these well thought ideas, and spend 15-20 years.... Too much talking, too much writing and that kind of thing.”

Change, even of the Barbados type, quiet and resolute, requires something that committees and reports do not create or capture; leadership, courage and hard work, which were the qualities that marked Barrow out from other leaders.

His brazen, we can do attitude is what we require in these times.

I want to end on a personal note.

The free education that Barrow instituted, is one of the reasons I am here.

I grew up poor, by any and every measure.

My guiding philosophy, in whatever space I find myself in, is to attempt to remove deprivation in all its forms, especially mental deprivation and to promote excellence.

Some days and in some ways, we all fall short of the Glory, but that should never deter the trying.

Inequality must be removed from Barbadian society and replaced with a fairer, kinder, meritocratic society where talent, hard work and merit are rewarded.

And no one asks you “where you from” as a way to determine whether you have value or not, to national debate, public life, or to be given opportunities.

If there is one part of Barrow’s legacy we can hold to, it is his quest for social justice.

I am not going to pretend that the answers are easy to what Barbados faces, but hopefully tonight we added to the ongoing discussion about the development of Barbados.

The work ahead of us as country will be hard, and I know that it feels dark now.

We must believe that we will all walk in the sun again.

We must believe that that as a country and as individuals, our best days are ahead of us, with some imagination and hard work.

We must believe that Barbados will be that shining city on the hill, that new Jerusalem for all her people.

Thank you. Good night. God bless.
