

Part 3- POLITICAL PRINCIPLES

For most of its history, the political life of Trinidad and Tobago was controlled absolutely from abroad. There is one slight difference between the islands in that up until 1898 when Britain joined them in one state, Tobago had a limited representative institution, the House of Assembly. But this was exclusively for the white planters and it was a powerless body, the most it could do was make recommendations to the colonial government.

This is completely within the logic of how the society was conceived by those who founded it – the colonial powers. It was not really seen as what you would call a society. It was a collection of labouring human chattel under the management of white settlers to serve one purpose - turn the resources stolen from the indigenous peoples into riches for the ‘mother’ countries.

Emancipation brought no change to this vision, just different legal and social forms to achieve the same end.

In Guyana and Trinidad, where the colonizers felt the amount of available land could afford the ex-slave population some room for Independent action, they introduced East Indian Indentureship. This was calculated to keep the plantation system going based on a labour force that was controlled and robbed of their human rights. It also maintained the powerlessness of the freed Africans, whose survival was once more dependent on the planters’ terms.

In the minds of the Europeans therefore, there was no basis whatsoever for any form of participation by the majority of the people here. The more like zombies they could be the better. If the people had a say they would talk about interests (their own) which were outside the purpose of the system.

Our forefathers, though, did not accept this definition of their role. They organized and fought in different ways. The response to their struggles was repression by the gun and attempts at pacification by patronizing concessions. Still the unrelenting pressure cracked the seemingly solid walls of direct rule from abroad.

Within the twentieth century, the system of government underwent change from Crown Colony rule, to limited representation, to full adult suffrage and even all the legal and symbolic trappings of Independence.

But essentially, as we showed in Conventional Politics the rule of Aliens was replaced by the administration of an alienated elite, working within alienated institutions. The system by and large continues to serve the inheritors of the same old interests.

The masses of the people have only the most superficial relationship to representatives, Parliament, Regional Corporations and all the Institutions of the system.

The people's institutionalized involvement in politics is limited to voting once every five years or seeking 'favours' (really rights most times) through party affiliation or area representative. Organized people's participation in politics is mainly in the form of protest action, demonstrating the extent of exclusion of the people from the fundamental political process.

Again this is within the logic of a system where the economic base is geared to serving Imperialist interests.

But such a system diminishes Man. It prepares people to surrender themselves to Messiahs. It is no basis for the development of our people a conclusion powerfully asserted by the mobilized masses in 1970, which resurfaced once more in the recent People's Parliaments.

The essential principle on which the political system has to be based to answer the needs and demands of the people can be simply stated:

THE PEOPLE MUST BE THE EFFECTIVE CONTROLLERS OF THE POLITICAL PROCESS.

There are several basic aspects of this principle we need to clearly identify.

1) THE POLITICAL SYSTEM MUST BE INDEPENDENT OF OUTSIDE CONTROL AND MANIPULATION.

An independent economic base is a minimum condition for this since "there is no political power without economic power" (Conventional Politics or Revolution). Economic dependence is the material basis of neo-colonialism. Given the realities of international pressure a strong will to self-determination on the part of the people and the leaders is also essential.

2) THE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS MUST BE STRUCTURED TO INVOLVE THE PEOPLE AS THE SUPREME AUTHORITY IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS.

Power must now be effectively wielded, by broadly based people's institutions, that is institutions like the People's Parliaments which are open to the participation of all, not just representative institutions. Representative Institutions must be subordinate to and serve institutions of direct people's participation, an arrangement which would in fact make the people collectively, the NATIONAL EXECUTIVE, and their chosen representatives servants of the people.

Those institutions which collectively make up the NATIONAL EXECUTIVE must establish the policy framework for the society and ensure the performance of representative bodies charged with turning national policies into specific programs and having them implemented.

The principle of participation must be maintained in every area of the process. For example, educational curriculum should be drafted with the involvement of teachers, students and parents along with administrators.

The NATIONAL EXECUTIVE must monitor the ongoing activities and programmes of the representative bodies in the society, make periodic review of overall direction and achievement and retain the right of intervention and final say on any aspect of program at any time.

The broadly based people's institutions must be operational at different levels of the society, not only at the level of the NATIONAL EXECUTIVE. Just as there are areas of national responsibility, there are also areas for community control and even broader areas of concern such as is the case with the island of Tobago.

This system would free the people from the tyranny of the virtually unchecked power of elected representatives in relation to the masses of the people. Once installed in office political leaders are pliant to Imperialist interests and powerfully organized local vested interests, while the disorganization of the people allows for their interests to be treated as secondary.

The people must now form the organized base of the political system.

This is the only framework within which the question of Tobago and its relationship to Trinidad could really be resolved. The power of abuse which a centralized authority in Trinidad has, is what is responsible for the dangling of Tobago.

Parliament made a promise of Internal self-government to Tobago and took no concrete steps to implement it for years. When, under pressure, a House of Assembly is finally set up on the island, one Minister dared to say that Tobago has no internal self-government and mocked at the powers of the House of Assembly, simply because the ruling party was soundly defeated in the elections to that House

When the people control the institutions of decision-making there can be no such frustration of their expressed will by a minority of politicians.

Whereas some existing institutions can be adapted to play their role in making people's power a reality, there is definite need for the formation of new institutions.

The theoretical and legal framework is not enough to guarantee that institutions would in fact function as institutions of people's power. Other important factors are the

very process by which the institutions are formed and most important, the political culture of the society. We therefore state as another aspect of the general principle.

3) THE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE NEW SOCIETY MUST GROW OUT OF OUR PEOPLE'S CONSCIOUS CREATIVE EFFORT TO BUILD INSTITUTIONS BY WHICH THEY CAN GOVERN THEMSELVES.

Offering the people a complete format of preconceived procedures, rules and regulations as a people's institution will not work. The psychological bind of Man to Institution comes when there is involvement in the process of creating the Institution. It is over time, by constant observation, assessment and development that it will become possible to formalize the structures of people's institutions. What is vital is that the principle of people's power remains the guide in the building of the institutions.

4) THE POLITICAL CULTURE MUST BE CONSCIOUSLY TRANSFORMED SO THAT IT CAN BE A SUSTAINING BASIS FOR PEOPLE'S POLITICS.

It would call for a tremendous amount of political education, both in theory and practice, for a people who have been conditioned to see themselves only as voters, to leave 'politics' to the 'politicians', to trust their destiny in the hands of a leader and hope for the best, to now change and conceive of themselves as the controllers of the political process; to re-define politics as 'How to live, how all of us....are going to create this kind of society we want.'" (Conventional Politics).

Changing the political culture means even more than this. People need not only to grasp the new political approach theoretically but to really internalize it. Participation must come like an instinct so that it permeates the approach of individuals in the society to everything. Only in such a psychological environment can people's control become a reality.

5) THE POLITICAL SYSTEM MUST ENCOURAGE AND ALLOW THE MAXIMUM FREE EXPRESSION OF THE PEOPLE.

The growth of people's participation needs an environment where the people feel free to express the way they feel and what they want for the society. In a society where there is an atmosphere of suppression and power is concentrated in the hands of a few, talk of democracy is a sham, all those basic freedoms, which are written into almost every constitution (freedom of speech, movement, association, freedom of the press etc.) are empty rhetoric.

For example, the principle of Freedom of Association is often violated, especially in respect of Trade Unions, which, despite the misdirection of so many here, is an important basis of worker organization and potentially an instrument of more direct participation of the worker in the affairs of his country. In order to protect narrow

political interests every possible obstacle is placed in the way of the growth of a union which is defined as anti-government, or which employers do not like because of its demonstrated commitment to its members, even though workers gravitate towards it.

Or, as another example, the question of freedom of the press. Even in the absence of official censorship, a government which is alienated from the people and/or narrow or financially powerful interest blocs exert inordinate pressures on the media, forcing it to contradict its role as an avenue of free expression.

On the whole in an environment where there is victimization of individuals for legitimate expressions of belief, where there is harassment, emasculation and even destruction of organizations, whether political, social (like the steelband movement), trade union or whatever, you cannot awaken in people the spirit to contribute thoughtfully to the political process.

The opening up of the society, in principle, to freedom of expression, becomes practical with the complementary development of the new institutional framework of the society where the established power of the people can prevent any particular interest group from denying essential freedom to other organizations, individuals, institutions or the wider society in general.

6) POLITICAL LEADERSHIP MUST BE HONEST, MUST HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THE PEOPLE, MUST BELIEVE IN AND BE COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE'S POWER.

Given the fact that a system rooted in the exercise by the people is not different but runs counter to the experiences of this society, political leadership has a crucial part to play in the whole process of change.

For people's conceptual awareness to mature, for a new political culture to become ingrained in the society so that the exercise of power comes natural to people, for new institutions to reach an advanced form, it takes time. In the building stages leaders in whom the people place their trust could sabotage the process.

So the people have to be very careful about the leadership they choose. And they have to be ever vigilant to ensure that the nation remains on the road dictated by the principles which they themselves have decided upon.

7) TRUTH MUST BE A CORNERSTONE OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM.

This must mean more than anti-corruption in the sense of dealing with those found guilty of robbing the people. It must be the preservation of political morality. For example, forms of manipulating people for narrow minority interests, playing on weaknesses like rum and roti politics (or chicken and champagne) undermines morality and the basis of Truth in the system. Information to the people must be adequate as well

as true and not calculated to mislead. People must not be deceived into believing that what they are doing asked to do, any exercise of discussion or decision is to serve one purpose, when the real motivation is completely different.

An environment of Truth is vital to the functioning of a new political system. Actions that breach the trust between people and leadership lead to a loss of confidence not only in the leaders, but the people lose faith even in themselves and the new process. This is vital in an area like National Security. Because of the necessarily secret nature of information here, it provides excuses for abuse under any system. Maintaining National Security therefore needs great trust in leadership.

8) GREAT EMPHASIS MUST BE PLACED ON THE UNITY OF THE CARIBBEAN.

It is therefore in the interests of all countries in the Caribbean to seek the broadest and deepest practical unity, and within the shortest period of time possible.

Though there are barriers, many of them artificially created, there is a commonality of historical experience and need, which is recognized and inculcated in the peoples of the region, could generate a powerful mass demand for unity that could conquer many obstacles, even across those barriers of language that are projected as so difficult.

Regional institutions such as CARIFESTA mark a small beginning to achieving this in the Arts. The political will of the people and leaders can build this unity generally.

CONCLUSION

What we have outlined here is a framework of principles for a new political system. It would take dedication as a people and hard work as a people for the society to translate these ideals into a practical system of government. But the basis is there.

Our political experience establishes what we believe theoretically. Even though the historical realities of power in the society have succeeded at one level in resigning people to an alienated, non-participatory role in politics, at another level of our Being we have totally rejected that.

The reactions of people at many of the People's Parliaments NJAC organized, showed that the institution provided expression for a deep felt but suppressed urge in people to have a meaningful say in the politics of their country. We realized that even though this was not generally articulated in a conscious way before, it is very much a part of the subjective reality of the people.

Many people said that the People's Parliaments on direct issues of national concern had stimulated in them an awareness that it was their right to speak and be heard on the affairs of the country. They insisted that this must, in principle be the basis for re-organizing the political system.

The fact that systems which deny people full participation suppress a need in Man, means too that only under a system of people's power can Man be in harmony with his social environment and able to develop to his fullest.

There is also a cultural basis for the people to make this change. People's power, although revolutionary in our present historical circumstances, is not outside the traditions of the majority of our people. Africans and Indians who form the bulk of the population came originally from cultures with deep democratic roots.

Within these societies there were political systems which gave the individual direct expression and identity within the decision-making process. The tradition of participation was so rooted that even when conquest by neighbours led to the subjection of one geo-political unit to another, each unit maintained its essential institutions and process within the larger state or empire.

Finally, we re-emphasize what we said in 'Slavery to Slavery' "Something can only be right when the people want it for themselves". This must condition the approach to the politics of change in the country. You cannot try to force people into a new system. In fact that would be contradictory to what the New Society is supposed to be about.

Therefore, it can only be built be an approach centered on: EDUCATION, DISCUSSION AND PERSUASION.

LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE.