Three issues to measure CARICOM by

When the Prime Minister of the Bahamas, Perry Christie, opens the 26th CARICOM Heads of Government Intercessional meeting on February 26th in Nassau, one might be forgiven for wondering if this regional summit will be perceived any more positively than those in the recent past.

While some of the issues to be considered are of significance for the region in strategic terms, or are of functional importance if Caribbean regional institutions are to continue to operate, the prevailing sense is that few of the issues touch everyday lives and that drift and delayed implementation remain the prevailing forces. So much so, that some suggest the meetings may have become an end in themselves, and a way of papering over the cracks of Caribbean disunity.

Those who care of course wish this was not so, but the impression is that in the absence of a genuinely common domestic or foreign policy, an every-country-for-itselt attitude, and a secretariat lacking executive authority, means that the meetings, for the most part, are becoming a side show and one that the media increasingly ignores.

Unfortunately, CARICOM is not geared up to provide in popular form public information on what is likely to be discussed, or to use social or other media encourage a sense of public participation.

This is because in part the Secretariat is limited in terms of financial and human resource – the issue of payments by governments to keep the Secretariat running is an agenda item in Nassau – yet it would cost little to try to capture popular imagination around some of the issues to be discussed.

As it happens, this time around the Bahamas Information Service has indicated on its website what the agenda will be: The principles to guide the identification of CARICOM candidates for international positions; the establishment of the CARICOM Committee of Ambassadors; revision of emoluments and proposed pension rules for judges of the Caribbean Court of Justice; financing of the CARICOM Secretariat and community institutions; audit of the Caribbean Knowledge Learning and Network Agency; reparations for native genocide and slavery; financing and composition of the Marijuana Commission; discussions on how the Food and Agriculture Organisation can support the development of agriculture in the Community; and relations with the Dominican Republic.

There will also be an important discussion among Caribbean law enforcement agencies and intelligence services in the context of regional security of the threat posed by the so called Islamic State. In addition, former Prime Minister Patterson of Jamaica will engage with Heads in a dialogue on how best to leverage the human, cultural and natural assets of the region to its economic benefit.

From an international perspective three issues stand out as requiring urgent attention.

The first of these is the relationship with the Dominican Republic. In 2013 the CARICOM Bureau of Heads of Government agreed language in a statement that sought to isolate the country and all but suggested a wish to break off relations. Although CARICOM’s position was based on a number of legitimate concerns, it also demonstrated how little understanding existed across the region of the internal political, social or economic dynamics of the Dominican Republic. It suggested too a failure to understand the tensions and legal complexities of the issue within the Dominican Republic, or the
practical impact of sharing an island with a country that has been in decades-long turmoil, has a porous border, is weakly and chaotically administered, is the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, and from which floods of people are constantly trying to exit.

As a result, much of CARICOM has cut itself off from a nation that is rapidly becoming, despite shortcomings, an economic powerhouse in the region.

In a welcome new development, the Prime Minister of the Bahamas, a country facing its own difficulties with respect to Haitian economic refugees, has noted that CARICOM must engage in political dialogue and contact with the Dominican Republic. This, he suggested, might best take place within the framework and context of the requirements of CARIFORUM, under the revised Cotonou Agreement and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

The second issue is the continuing failure of CARICOM to nominate a candidate for the post of Commonwealth Secretary General, potentially missing the opportunity for the Caribbean to play a central role on the world stage.

As is now well known, there are once again three Caribbean candidates whose names have been put forward for consideration for the region’s candidate for the post. One, Sir Ronald Sanders, who has the support of nine out of twelve CARICOM governments, previously withdrew his name when it became apparent that some CARICOM Heads were adamant that they would only accept a consensus candidate.

Since then however, Antigua’s Prime Minister, Gaston Browne, with Sir Ronald’s agreement, has proposed to CARICOM Heads of Government that the Antiguan diplomat and academic be recognised as the best qualified candidate, and that Heads reconsider all three.

While some CARICOM member states have continued to argue that consensus is necessary, Prime Minister Browne and others have noted that this has not been the case in similar recent decisions where it has been possible for the region to successfully put forward the best and most experienced candidates, for instance, for the role of ACP Secretary General.

The argument now appears to revolve around procedure and not who might be the best Caribbean person with majority support for this vital global role at a time of growing international uncertainty.

Space does not allow much on the third issue: reparations. This important and deeply emotional issue rightly remains high on the regional agenda and continues to move forward on the basis of regional consultations. However, if Caribbean Heads are to agree on how to prosecute the region’s case, they will need the wisdom of Solomon to decide how to balance justifiable claims with the real politick of modern relationships, and the not to be ignored danger that the issue may cross over into the mainstream political arena in Europe at a time when racism and xenophobia are resurgent in nations where the Caribbean’s Diaspora live.

How much progress is made on these and other issues and what we learn about the detail will say much about whether CARICOM has a positive future.

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