CARIBBEAN IDENTITY

A Commentary On Regionalism And Caribbean Identity.

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There has been a lot of discrepancy concerning the concept “Caribbean Identity”. This discrepancy concerns the ensuing debate between the pluralists and the consensualists and the way in which diversity is viewed. The former perspective argues that diversity negates the existence of a single Caribbean Identity. The latter argues that diversity has resulted in a sort of ‘melting pot’ effect where the blending of different cultures has resulted in a creolized, syncretic identity.

Aside from the fact that there is racial pluralism one cannot negate the existence of "national pluralism", meaning that there is a sort of heterogeneous identity based on national identities in the different islands. Here I use M.G. Smith's plural concept to refer to nationality rather than ethnicity. With this type of identity one not only identifies more with his nation (which is a natural case), but the national identity comes into conflict with the regional identity to the point where there might be the separation of the individual nation from the region. The failure of the West Indies Federation and the events leading up to this failure is the perfect example of this.

Why is there a need for the islands of the Caribbean to forge a Caribbean Identity? Is it just for emotive reasons, where we see the need to forge a bond based on our similar traumatic historical experience and our need to assert that we too belong to the rest of the World and are unique just like any other civilization? Or is Caribbean Identity needed for rational reasons where there is the need to collude and forge a single unit based on mutual cooperation? It is a consensus that years of colonial exploitation together with lack of resources and small size have made the individual islands relatively incompatible economically and politically on a global scale and that regionalism is the most feasible alternative. Regionalism therefore can be considered a rational and institutional consolidation of Caribbean Identity. Up to this point regionalism in the Caribbean has been focused in areas of functional and non-functional areas of Co-operation. In the area of functionalism the most explicit examples are the Caribbean Examinations Council (C.X.C), The University of The West Indies (U.W.I.), The Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBL) and the West Indian Cricket Team. In the area of politics and economics there is CARICOM, --the name that comes to mind when we think of regionalism in the Caribbean. At present there is the
proposition of another regional institution, that of the Caribbean Court Of Justice. Indeed the debates surrounding the formation of this institution brings a feeling of déjà vu, when one recalls those forged against the West Indies Federation. The aim of this commentary is to discuss the interconnection between Regional Identity and Regionalism. I wish to examine a few proposals towards deepening regionalism and to comment upon the hindrance that national identity as opposed to regional identity poses to the development of regionalism.

The Caribbean on the eve of the Twenty-first century is significantly different from the mid-century Caribbean. It can hardly be called a region of exclusively separate islands, each fighting for a stake in the World economy and trying to gain political independence from the ‘overprotective Mother’-- Great Britain. Regionalism has ensured that the Caribbean if not united as a single political unit, has achieved levels of collusion that have at least to a certain extent achieved a regional identity among the islands. That there are degrees of plural identity both at the ethnic and national levels seems to me worthy of recognition, but it has not been strong enough to totally hamper regionalism. Certainly at the International Level the Caribbean is being looked at as a region and not as a collection of individual islands both in the economic and political areas and indeed socially and culturally. This is inline with the increased movement towards regionalism on the worldwide level. Pooling of resources has indeed payed off to a large degree.

Are we however to be satisfied with what exists now? There is a lot of room for improvement, most evidently in terms of economic and political cooperation. For whereas we have achieved a level of regionalism, this is somewhat concentrated in more areas than others. There seems to be more co-operations in functional areas. Certainly the West Indian Cricket Team and The University of The West Indies, though desiring improvement in certain areas seem to be the most relatively successful at first glance in terms of the degree of co-operation and unity. The political and economic areas, however seem more problematic, probably because politics and economics are tied in with the ever – delicate and discrepant issues of sovereignty and resource – sharing. There are areas of improvement that have been discussed and which are worthy of consideration. I wish to point to three which I see as extremely significant as well as problematic.

**Deepening Regional Integration**

Here I wish to point out that I am referring to an improvement in the regional relations that are already existent among the Independent English-Speaking Islands and Suriname. I am not referring
to an expansion in regionalism to include other countries such as those of the French-Speaking and Spanish-Speaking Caribbean and still-existing colonies.

Greater Ease of Movement and the Prospects for Intra-regional Tourism.

One of the hindrances to Caribbean Unity has to do with geography. We are not only nationally separated but also geographically, for there is the barrier of the sea to consider. Added to this is the fact that few Caribbean persons have ties with each other whether through family or friendship. There is the need to improve intra-regional transportation for the purposes of visiting, working or residing. Easy movement is indeed a problem in need of critical attention. That it is easier and for a Jamaican to travel to Miami than to Trinidad and Tobago, is not only explained by distance but also finance. It is often argued that Caribbean people need to take more vacations within the regions, but this is only possible if there are provisions made for easy movement. The rational effect of this easier movement would be reflected in economic gain for the islands concerned. The level of intra-regional tourism, which is so minuscule it seems non-existent, would certainly be improved. But there is the argument that can be posed ‘Do Caribbean people want to travel to other Caribbean islands? Do they see them as attractive? I argue that while one must consider that where there exists an attraction to all things ‘foreign’ (meaning not Caribbean), it might not be fair to argue that this ‘foreign-mindedness’ will hamper intra-regional travel, were the proper arrangements made. One of these arrangements is greater publicity and concentration on intra-regional tourism. Extra-regional tourism has been relied upon for years as the only form of tourism. Perhaps one of the reasons for the reluctance of Caribbean persons to travel within the region is that we hardly know what the islands have to offer in the first place.

Greater economic co-operation.

This is undoubtedly one area that needs consideration and that has been achieved through some degree of common economic policies within CARICOM etc. But there are so many more proposals that need to be addressed.

Firstly there has been some degree of commentary about installing a common Caribbean currency, that will stand up against that of other currencies. The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States has achieved this. The gains from this would be critical. It would mean greater ease of movement of finances from one island to the other. A common exchange rate also means that there is greater financial homogeneity and regional bargaining with the rest of the World would be less
cumbersome. It could also contribute to the afore-mentioned proposal of improving intra-regional travel. Of course this conversion of national currencies into a regional currency is more complicated than it seems and will undoubtedly involve more rigorous analysis.

Strengthening economic ties might also contribute to greater intra-regional investment. We are aware of the enormous degrees of First World investment in the Caribbean Nations by Multinational co-operations who provide jobs but also exploit West Indian Labour and export financial gains abroad. Greater Intra-regional investment by Caribbean nationals and co-operations ensures to a certain degree that finances remain in the region.

Judicial Integration
The proposed Caribbean Court Of Justice is indeed a welcome addition to the deepening of regionalism and by my observation it seems that it is publicly welcome. The CCJ represents an area of functional co-operation that undoubtedly creates in the region a united judicial force that has been non-existent prior to this. But the prospect of the CCJ is not only welcomed by the same arguments that propose regionalism, it is also challenged by the same arguments that have opposed regionalism in the past and it's deepening in the future. I propose that the ever-looming and most critical hindrance to regional co-operation and greater West Indian Unity is the concept I discussed in the introduction—that of national –pluralism and its partner, sovereignty.

National Identities, Sovereignty and The Hindrances To Deepened Regionalism.
It is evident that there is still significant degree of separation between and among the islands, which is channeled through the individual national patriotism and the paranoia of erosion of sovereignty. National patriotism can even be said to be the order of the day and Regional patriotism comes to the fore, only in situations where the region competes internationally. National patriotism and intra-regional conflict is partly fostered by the existence of competition between the different islands both in the areas of sports and other activities. But healthy competition and patriotism is only a natural occurrence, where it becomes threatening is when it spills over and influences regional co-operation. Here I see Ian Boxill’s study, Ideology and Regional Integration(1995) as significant. Boxill concluded from a study done on the attitudes towards regionalism of a select group of Caribbean Intellectuals, that there was the lack of an ‘ideology of regionalism’, which in turn affected the development of regionalism in a negative way. This
ideology of regionalism basically spoke to the attitudes that were shown towards identification with the Caribbean as a region. Demas in *Towards West Indian Survival* somewhat reiterates this perspective where he states that one hindrance to the deepening of regionalism is that we continue to view ourselves as individual countries. This has manifested itself in limited implementation of the provisions of the *Treaty Of Chaguaramas*. There is still the existence of separation on issues of importance. The most glaring example of this is the Ship Rider Agreement, or maybe what is more specifically, *The Ship Rider Agreements*. It is extremely significant that the Caribbean Islands involved represented a divided front on the matter ---that the majority of islands conceded to this agreement with limited or no consultation with each other. The issue was not the relationship among the Caribbean islands with the United States but rather the relationship between individual islands and the super-power. But that there is official positive debate between the islands towards a Regional Supreme Court implies that there is a degree of regional ideology. What is disturbing are some of the counter-arguments that I have been aware of within the public arena. In Jamaica (I am not aware of the counter-arguments within other islands) they are similar to the debates surrounding the formation of the West Indian Federation.

The arguments against the signing of the CCJ charter come from within the political arena as well as from the civil group, the *Jamaicans For Justice*. The latter represents an organized critical force in the matter. Among the arguments against the signing of the CCJ charter is an economic one. It concurs that Jamaica is not economically prepared for an investment in such an institution and that Jamaica’s own Court Systems must first be repaired—that it deserves immediate attention, before we can even begin to think about a Caribbean Court Of Justice.

A second argument is that there needs to be a referendum on the issue, that it is not only a constitutional right but also the most moral way to go. I am reminded of the referendum surrounding the West Indies Federation that was highly steeped in propaganda. This propaganda basically spoke to what would be the draining of the resources of the more wealthy islands towards sustaining the less wealthy ones. This argument is also coming from within the political arenas of government.

These two arguments are significant because they show that internal politics of the countries of the Caribbean are a major influence on regionalism and can prove detrimental in the event of strengthening it. Apart from the CCJ this can have catastrophic effects for other proposals. For
instance, there is the economic issue to consider. Will internal national politics affect, for example the formation of a regional currency and investment where there is the transfer of wealth and resources to consider?

Rational-choice theory dictates that politics and subsequently political involvement is undertaken by individuals with the motivation that they will secure individual benefits. Thus, regionalism takes place on the assumption that each island has something to gain. Bearing this in mind, deepened regionalism is most naturally a discouraging factor if individual countries envision a situation where their resources are almost forfeited to the greater good of other islands. In this regard, 'resource sharing' then is more accurately looked upon as 'resource transfer'. However, the issue seems to be one of perception. If regional integration takes place to the point where the Caribbean becomes a 'Nation' rather than a 'Region', individual benefits translate into group benefits, and resources are shared rather than simply transferred or drained.

The discrepancy between national and regional identity is not to be taken lightly but neither is it to be treated a complete and overwhelming hindrance to regional deepening in the Caribbean. It has to be admitted that regionalism in the Caribbean has deepened. Worthy of note is our proposals to replace the British A' Level examinations with our own version together with the survival of the University of the West Indies and the proposed Caribbean Court Of Justice. At present there are even talks regarding the establishment of a Caribbean Encyclopedia.

World politics is dominated by the existence of regional entities and by the deepening of unity within these entities. The Caribbean is increasingly being treated in International Bargaining as a whole, not as individual islands, so it seems that deepened regionalism is the way to go in order to keep step with the International Community. With regards to Caribbean Identity, the emotive factor has been joined by the rational factor —of economic survival and compatibility through regionalism. However, National Individuality should be given some amount of credence within the debate regarding the deepening of regional integration.
References

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William Demas, Towards West Indian Survival copyright 1990 The West Indian Commission Secretariat, Black Road, St. James, Barbados.

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