Of Arrogance, Politics, and Use of Intemperate Language

Mr. Norman Faria, Guyana’s Honorary Consul in Barbados, in a guest column article in the Nation Newspaper of 12th June 2009, concluded the article, the title of which was ‘Aid Workers, Not Play Politics, CCL’, with the following statement, “The office should be there with forward-looking advice and encouragement. It should avoid engaging in ultimately futile talk about alleged shortcomings of governments in so-called sending countries.”

Note that Mr. Faria was responding to what he perceived to be an unfavourable or a pro-Barbados contribution by the Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL) to the ongoing immigration debate in the island. Elsewhere in the article, Mr. Faria made the following statement, “It is somewhat strange that the CCL, the regional trade union umbrella body in the English speaking Caribbean, should spend so much of its statement attacking the governments in the migrants’ birthplace. This is playing politics and I am wondering what the CCL’s affiliates think about this. The interests and image of the affiliate members would have been better served had the umbrella body been more responsible in its mandate to defend working people’s interests regardless of whether they are undocumented or not.”

The two quoted passages from Mr. Faria’s article are remarkable for some specific reasons. The first quote is also noteworthy for its use of language.

Since the start of the ongoing debate on immigration within CARICOM, and particularly with regard to Barbados, those individuals who have been following the debate should by now have discerned a particular pattern of language that is being used by some of the contributors to the debate. For example, our senses have been piqued by words or phrases such as ‘despicable’, ‘offensive’, ‘xenophobic’, ‘jingoistic’, ‘chauvinistic’, ‘malignant xenophobia’, ‘rhetoric of despair’, ‘shall be removed’, and ‘hostile environment’. And now we have ‘ultimately futile’ and ‘so-called sending countries’.

The examples we have cited are just a smattering of the vocabulary that has been used by both politicians and non-politicians in the ongoing debate. Politicians, however, have some
immunities or privileges that allow them to use such language without, in most cases, doing irreparable harm to themselves or to their political parties. This is the case since one of the features of the Caribbean political environment is that politicians in the region, when appealing to their constituents, have, over the years, and continue to do so in current times, resorted to the use of language that can be described as ‘flowery’, ‘colourful’, ‘strident’, ‘arrogant’, ‘intemperate’, or ‘muscular’. Although some of us may frown on the use of such language, it is nevertheless now seen as part of the arsenal of politicians when addressing some issues.

Non-politicians, however, should be wary of using such language in public debates since some would argue that they have not earned the right to do so. Furthermore, in debates where there is a clash of views between non-politicians and politicians, with a motley group of spectators on the sidelines, one should pay heed to a well-known expression used in Barbados, for which I am sure there are similar maxims in the other territories, ‘You can’t fight fire with fire’.

What, therefore, is so surprising is that you now have a situation where some of the official spokesmen on behalf of immigrants in Barbados from other CARICOM countries, or other people who have appointed themselves as spokesmen, could resort to the use of such language which, at best, does nothing to endear themselves to the audience that they are trying to woo over or convince. Such language, in my view, could help reinforce beliefs held by some, and, at worst, could lead to the harbouring of resentment by others. They seemed to have forgotten, or just simply ignored, that the audience they must convince is not primarily the politicians or nationals of other countries including their own, but the majority of Barbadians who are yearning for a reasoned, dispassionate approach to the issues surrounding migrant labour and freedom of movement within CARICOM member states.

Secondly, and with specific regard to Mr. Faria’s article, the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines futile as follows: ‘useless, ineffectual, vain, frivolous, or trifling’. What meaning then should we assign to the term ‘ultimately futile’? Should we interpret it to mean that the comments of CCL are ‘of slight importance’ (meaning of trifling), and will, in the ‘final analysis’ (one meaning of ultimately), therefore have little or no impact or influence on the governments of the so-called sending countries? Or should we interpret the term to mean that, ‘when all has been said and
done’ (a well-known expression that is equivalent to ultimately), the governments of the so-called sending countries ‘lack the ability’ (one meaning of ineffectual) to reverse the feelings of hopelessness and despair being experienced by some of the citizens of those countries, thus forcing them to take up residence in other countries, even if they remain undocumented?

Thirdly, in the second quote CCL is accused of ‘playing politics’. Once again, any objective comments made by entities on the issue of illegal immigration and its impact on host countries is described as ‘playing politics’, the catch-all phrase that substitutes for a reasoned and objective response. Fourthly, Mr. Faria prescribes how CCL should have responded, and therefore could be said to be seeking to usurp the right of CCL to express an independent opinion on a matter of grave importance to CARICOM member states.

The harsh reality, though, is that comments on the alleged shortcomings of governments in the so-called sending countries are not misplaced or irrelevant, and that the so-called sending countries have names. One of the trends that has emerged in the ongoing freedom of movement debate is the reluctance of governments of CARICOM member states to speak out, for fear of being accused of ‘meddling in the internal affairs of other countries’, on the conditions in other member states that help contribute to the outflow of nationals. In contrast, that is an issue that has been tackled head-on by the European Union.

We, however, believe that if a reasoned and dispassionate debate is to occur on the freedom of movement issue, then the time has come when we must shatter the shibboleths relating to speaking out on all the internal conditions in CARICOM member states, conditions that contribute immensely to the outflow of individuals from some countries. Mr. Faria speaks on behalf of the Guyanese government and Guyanese residents in Barbados, and we therefore think that it is appropriate to provide readers with a feel for some of those alleged shortcomings that he has alluded to, specifically with reference to Guyana. I therefore reproduce below a verbatim summary of the report, ‘Promotion and Protection of All Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Including the Right to Development: Report of the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Addendum, Mission to Guyana’, compiled by Ms. Gay McDougall. Before we present the summary, a brief note on Ms. McDougall is appropriate.
Ms. McDougall is Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Washington College of Law, American University. Since 2005 she has served as Independent Expert on Minority Issues at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. Prior to that she was Executive Director of Global Rights, during which time she was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for her innovative and highly effective work on behalf of international human rights. Ms McDougall also holds numerous awards from national civil rights organisations.

From 1997 to 2001 she served as an independent expert on various United Nations human rights bodies, including the UN treaty body that oversees the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Ms McDougall also served as one of five international members of South Africa’s 16-member Independent Electoral Commission which successfully organized and administered the country’s first non-racial elections in 1994. From 1980 to 1994 she was Director of the Southern Africa Project of the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights under Law in Washington, and in 1984 a Consultant on the United Nations Council for Namibia. She earned her JD at Yale University Law School and LLM in public international law at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Following is the verbatim summary of the McDougall Report on Guyana. Readers interested in accessing the full report can do so at the following website: www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49bfa6ec2.html.

“The independent expert on minority issues, Ms. Gay McDougall, visited Guyana between 28th July and 1st August 2008. During her visit, she travelled to Georgetown and surrounding communities. She held consultations with the State President, ministers and other senior government representatives, NGOs, civil society groups, political parties, religious leaders, academics and others working in the field of minority issues and anti-discrimination. The independent expert visited communities, including Buxton, and talked to community members about their lives and issues.”

“In July 2003, the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination,
xenophobia and related intolerance highlighted that he found that every level of Guyanese society is permeated by a profound moral, emotional and political fatigue, arising out of the individual and collective impact of ethnic polarization.\(^1\) In 2008, the independent expert witnessed a continuing societal malaise that shows evidence of having deepened and transformed in some instances into despair, anger and resistance. This is particularly evident among Afro-Guyanese individuals and communities that reported feeling excluded, discriminated against and criminalized.”

“Ethnically divided political and administrative structures and failed political processes have created deep frustrations and distrust in the institution of government. A climate of suspicion, rumour and conspiracy theory exists in Guyana which has been fuelled by exceptionally violent incidents in 2008. Two separate and conflicting narratives and perceptions of reality have emerged among Afro- and Indo-Guyanese, which threaten to undermine shared values and common goals that are essential to a united, prosperous Guyana.”

“The independent expert recognizes commendable steps on the part of the Government to date to address issues of ethnic tensions, criminal activities and economic underdevelopment. However, further effective action is required urgently to restore confidence in good governance and the rule of law among all communities, and prevent an inexorable slide into further polarization and possible violence. A new era of political will and strong, visionary leadership is required to realize change and reverse the economic and social stagnation that is evident in a divided Guyana.”

“Afro-Guyanese with whom the independent expert met described feeling excluded from having a full voice and stake in the national polity and equal enjoyment of rights in many fields of life including employment and economic participation. They reported stigmatization of young Afro-Guyanese males and entire African communities. Derogatory stereotypes of criminality colour wider societal perceptions of Afro-Guyanese individuals and communities.”

“Particular challenges affect women from minority communities, including a scarcity of

\(^1\) E/CN.4/2004/18/Add. 1, Mission to Guyana and to Trinidad and Tobago.
employment opportunities for women from Afro-Guyanese communities, the extremely heavy burden of care shouldered by single mothers, and a disturbing culture of domestic violence, often fuelled by poverty and unemployment in their communities. Women feel that domestic violence cases are not treated seriously by the criminal justice system. Additionally, women’s participation in political processes remains well below levels of equality.”

“Current anti-discrimination legislation and policies are insufficient to address discrimination, exclusion and ethnically based bias. A new and robust anti-discrimination and equality plan of action is required to be applied across all sectors of society to break down the barriers that have become ingrained in Guyana.”

“A bitter and destructive political environment has infected the wider society and is failing the people of Guyana. It must give way to a climate of truth, reconciliation and compromise. Reforms must be far-reaching and highly consultative. However, consultation and process must be time-bound and action-oriented, and must lead to concrete, achievable outputs that ensure non-discrimination and equality.”

“Promises must be delivered upon, including the urgent creation of five credible human rights commissions, to deliver change to the lives of individuals, families and communities and put in place new foundations upon which to build. An open and constructive dialogue on inclusive governance remains an essential component of this process. The Government of Guyana is urged to take the lead in initiating such a dialogue; however, political will must be demonstrated by all parties.”

Lastly, Mr. Faria, in his article, stated that the interests and image of the CCL’s affiliate members would have been better served had CCL been more responsible in its mandate to defend working people’s interests regardless of whether they are undocumented or not. In a subsequent article we will address the issue of rights of undocumented workers. Based on the relevant international conventions and covenants, we will demonstrate that developing countries, of which Barbados is one, are not automatically bound to extend the economic rights applicable to their citizens to non-nationals, documented or otherwise, and whether from developed or other developing
countries. Secondly, we will also demonstrate that the social, cultural, civil, and political rights that undocumented migrants are entitled to are circumscribed by the lack of relevant legislation in some of the host countries and by the undocumented status of the migrants themselves.

In light of the above, Mr. Faria, my advice is, as the boys on the block would say, “Wheel and come again.”