The Politicking behind the St. James North Constituency: Quelling a Storm in a Teacup

By
George C. Brathwaite

It is with some disinclination that I enter the current political fray regarding matters surrounding the actors and actions situated either in the Barbados Labour Party, its internal constituents, and the general hullabaloo that has been playing out in the constituency of St. James North which is a seat considered to be a stronghold and held by the BLP’s Rawle Eastmond. My disinclination stems from three key positions. Involved in this unmerited public spectacle is a political party that I remain a dedicated and loyal member; my friend is central to the ongoing debates; and thirdly, as a student of politics, I am a strong advocate for democratic traditions and the placing of the good of the collective people above the ambitions of individuals whose agendas are seldom fully known.

I turn now to the substantive though overblown debates. From the onset, I need to emphasise that most of the fuss relating to the allegations about a ‘padded list’ and the future candidature of the current Member of Parliament for the constituency, Rawle Eastmond, are simplistic but divisive. On two counts the simplicity can easily be established and I will explain these before getting to the more critical aspect of divisiveness.

Firstly, there are set procedures for becoming a member of the Barbados Labour Party and, in following those procedures, the Member of Parliament does not have an exclusive hand in attracting, recruiting, or approving the membership of persons desirous of joining the institution.

This notwithstanding, effective stewardship and plain common sense has a part to play in the signing on and vetting of new members so as to minimise the chances wherein one’s “branch and good work” could become “infiltrated” as Ms. Cynthia Forde alluded to in her support for Mr. Rawle Eastmond’s claim.

Eastmond suggested that the St. James North branch of the BLP has been affected by the infiltration of operatives to its membership given that the “enemy
is out there, and the enemy is the Democratic Labour Party.” In fact, prior to and in keeping with good practice in relation to the BLP’s annual conference and the selection of delegates, such list would have been vetted and updated. As far as I am aware, there are persons who are members of the BLP that previously held membership in the DLP.

This situation has not nor does it taint the current membership of former DLPites existing in the BLP. Eastmond’s is a non-point unless he can clearly identify the individuals who have joined, either by their effort or others’ efforts to become members of the BLP for reasons other than advancing the cause of the BLP.

It is in my estimation that those individuals who are actively canvassing the constituency and seeking to gain the candidature will of necessity translate verbal support into writing and paid membership. That process of itself is not unusual nor is it detrimental to the party provided that good sense, acute awareness for maintaining that support, and that the party’s internal mechanisms scrutinise before endorsement takes place. All of this is usually aligned with the request for membership in advancing the objectives of the BLP.

The second key factor that brings absurdity to the exaggerated controversy is the confusing and continuing fluctuation of the incumbent. Eastmond is on record as having signalled since 2008 a number of important things for which we can draw conclusions. Rawle Eastmond has stated on several occasions that this would be his final term in the Barbados House of Assembly providing his high-standard representation for the people of St. James North.

In addition, Eastmond on more than one occasion has endorsed one or the other potential candidate, and at the same time, he has sought to reason why one particular candidate and not the other. Less he forget, this writer who is an ardent supporter and friend of his, has in the past suggested to him that he ought to allow the nomination process to work and thereafter endorse whoever becomes the winning candidate.
It is also fair and correct to indicate that Rawle Eastmond, from time to time, has publicly stated that he is ready to continue for yet another term as the candidate and representative for the people of St. James North. This is despite matters of a private nature have been known to Barbadians. Rumours, perceptions, and actual infelicities have caused political fallout among voting populations in other jurisdictions once certain type matters have reached the public domain notwithstanding the calibre of representation individuals would have been previously exposed to by way of committed service.

These pronouncements and perceived infelicities by an individual, that many consider to be a ‘good man’, have come at a time when the members and supporters of the St. James North branch, the BLP, and Barbadians by extension can afford pitiful distractions. These are perilous economic times and persons appear more concerned with progressing the constituency and Barbados, than having to defend situations and circumstances that are inconsequential to empowering people, dealing with bread and butter issues, or restoring Barbados to a path of sustained economic and social development.

I made it clear to Rawle that given his appreciable and sustained longevity of work in the constituency, there was absolutely no reason why he should be forcing his constituents to make unnecessary value judgements regarding his health, personal circumstances, or indeed his capacity to perform on their collective behalves.

I told Rawle that my advice would be for him to bow out from being the candidate for the next general election knowing that he has truly served to the best of his ability and with the passion that any representative following should attempt to emulate.

Judging from the last week, I am not convinced that Rawle has properly rationalised or understood that he has regressed quickly from a position of compromise to one of confrontation. The confrontational actions are even with those members that are constituents of St. James North and his intimations spill over into the bosom of the BLP and negatively impacts on the political and
executive leadership of the BLP never mind his accusatory tones being targeted at an ailing and sometimes conniving DLP.

It is against those things that I now move to the condition of divisiveness that is fast becoming the signature of the supposed controversy. From the outset, both Cynthia Forde and Mia Mottley have come out in support of Rawle Eastmond knowing full well that Rawle’s key bone of contention (if accurate) is difficult to substantiate even under the best of circumstances.

Less than two weeks ago, it was made pellucid to Barbadians via a letter appearing in the Nation Newspaper, and addressed to the St. James North branch secretary, that Rawle would not seek to be nominated for the BLP, either in his presence or absence, to be a candidate contesting the St. James North seat. Perhaps, the only thing not declared in that letter was intent to step-down prior to the calling of a general election and persons like me were left to believe that Rawle Eastmond would serve out his time in the life of this Parliament rather than force a by-election.

What I find to be malicious and very disturbing are comments attributed to Peter Wickham as carried in the online newspaper of Barbados Today. Indeed, it is offensive that Wickham would want to thrust on the people of St. James North, the BLP, and many Barbadians a vicious and vitriolic sense of a self-imposed logic which ferments with a satirical manipulation of facts and traditions. Wickham uses his self-belief that he possess a monopoly on political and electoral knowledge in little Barbados by claiming that “the assumption in both political parties has always been that if you hold a seat, you are the candidate unless otherwise stated.” Not only is Wickham’s statement based upon a total fabrication of the facts, but he goes on to suggest that Rawle Eastmond is being “victimised for his support for Mia Mottley.” Two things immediately jump out at me.

For starters, and having followed most nominations in the BLP for at least a decade, incumbents wishing to continue to be candidates have put themselves at the behest of their branches; they have been nominated and seconded as part of a
legitimate process that is articulated in the BLP’s constitution. Provided that there are no other nominations and the process closes, it is only then that such conclusion may be arrived at that allows for the declared candidate to maintain the privilege of contesting for a seat in the national assembly.

Peter Wickham for reasons best known to him distorts the notion between conventions and the regulations dictating the candidate selection process of the BLP. Wickham says to Barbadians that the automatic endorsement of an incumbent without meeting the requirements of the valued constitutions of both political parties “has always been the tradition and once Eastmond has indicated that he is fit and able to contest the seat then there is reasonable logic that he should.” Whose logic are we witnessing; is it Wickham’s monopolistic logic? Considering the disquiet within the DLP in 2003 with Dr. David Estwick, one is likely to hazard a guess on the automatic ‘rubber-stamping’ of candidates in the DLP’s selection process.

These things are important only if to demonstrate that Peter Wickham has an agenda that is certainly not about supporting the efficacy of democratic traditions; law and order; or calling for Rawle Eastmond to be a successful candidate in the next general election. In fact, if I was in Rawle’s position and I had read Wickham’s defence of my position, I would be very concerned.

Of all the figurative, colloquialisms, and metaphoric expressions that form a part of Barbados’ culture, Wickham reduces Rawle Eastmond to being “the lowest hanging fruit in the Mottle basket.” What a shame! Wickham displays acidity towards persons of the BLP even without attempting to do so. While I do believe it may be out of character, I also recognise that changing circumstances may often alter one’s sense of civility. An interpretation of Wickham’s ranting in Barbados Today of February 2nd, 2012 leads one to speculate and visualise a real-life situation of political prostitution.

Can you imagine that Peter Wickham dares to say that the BLP “is being perceived as a party at war” when in fact, he has long been attempting to write the genesis, intermediaries, and conclusions of any apparent conflict or
disagreements for which he, through supposedly unbiased analyses, has come to define and ‘spin’ the statistics right across the Barbados political landscape.

For whose cause does Wickham write, if on the one hand, all those he condemns happen to have the surnames Arthur and Stuart; and on the other hand, those he seemingly seeks to elevate in the eyes of a discerning public are Mottley and Sinckler? To suggest that “what you are seeing is an attempt to victimise him [Rawle Eastmond] for his support for Mottley” is as scandalous a statement made by any political scientist ever in Barbados.

Wickham owes his profession a modicum of honesty and therefore he must come to the public with clean hands. Wickham must tell Barbados for what political position is Miss Mia Mottley contesting now or in the near future that she should be courting and/or expecting Rawle Eastmond’s support.

Why should the political leader of the Barbados Labour Party, democratically and popularly positioned to lead given his past record and the current and overwhelming support he constantly receives, have “to make peace with Miss Mottley?” Surely, Mr. Peter Wickham, you are not expecting that the BLP will fail to rally around its leader if as you indicate there is a war and the Mottley basket is already hanging low?

As far as I am aware, and in accordance with the laws of Barbados, there is only one Leader of the Opposition and that position as far as I can see will only again become vacant once the BLP reclaims the mantle of government in Barbados sometime within the next year or so. Miss Mottley held that position before; I would have thought her gaze would be looking forward and upward rather than backwards. Is Mottley in a war or competition for the position of Leader of the Opposition again; I hope not?

Perhaps, and as the old people would say, Peter Wickham is too full of himself and he is taking his writing and ranting much too serious to the point that he is fast losing credibility, integrity, and a reasonable degree of objectivity. It is exactly why the people and things Wickham wants to speak about appear so very
contradictory by Peter’s deduction that the Rawle Eastmond and St. James North episode is “completely illogical.”

The firm leadership of Owen Arthur, with his correct decision not to become immersed in empty discussions and divisive schemes which may entrap him into stepping outside of the BLP’s constitutional provisions, is well supported by the majority of the members of parliament and by the ‘executive’ and ‘ordinary’ members of the BLP. The political leader of the Barbados Labour Party continues to provide profound disclosures on the directions for the advancement of the BLP and the people of Barbados.

As a final word, both Rawle and Mia I consider to be good friends and political comrades undergirded with a similar social philosophy. If their actions and remonstrations are likely to divide more than they pull together or build, then their political futures may easily be exchanged one for the other. Should the political noose they have, with their own strengths or weaknesses, thrown above their heads become the last hurrah, then I too shall mourn their mortality.

At the same time, without being disloyal to the institution for which I am a member and devoting myself to the cause rather than to the personalities, I expect that I shall grow and become freed from any potential conflict of interest, although this response may invite its own vindictive reprisals.

Like those persons in St. James North, I have a right to choose who I shall support. I must say that I hope Peter Wickham does not get his wish; I hope that the nomination set for this Sunday comes off as another step towards the BLP’s mission of rescue, rebuild, and restore. Peter Wickham’s pitch is divisive and can only add to the woes of Eastmond, Mottley, and Sinckler; that is as sad as it is illustrative that hidden agendas do come with peace pacts!