

**Only in Barbados: The
Minister of Finance's
Happiness and the DLP's
Political Deception is a
Sadness for Bajans**

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By personal choice, I have not written recently on the social, political, or economic factors heavily impacting on Bajans, but I have observed the callous and perhaps reckless approach to governance by the DLP. The DLP regime has targeted the poor, the middle class, and there has been concerted effort by Cabinet to dismantle the gains achieved under the BLP. I am concerned, and particularly over the assault on Barbadian workers and their livelihoods. Nonetheless, the latest pronouncements and ensuing policies that have emerged from the DLP's political machinery and from within central cogs of the Barbados Cabinet demand unfettered commentary. This I owe it to my fellow men and women regardless of their political persuasion.

I begin by stating my 'critical' bemusement at the ridiculous phrasing employed by the Minister of Finance, Christopher Sinckler. In his Ministerial Statement delivered to the Parliament of Barbados on Friday, December 13th, 2003, Sinckler said to the Lower House that he was

"mindful" that the beleaguered DLP Cabinet had "completed the first three months of implementation" of the 'restructuring programme' which he had announced previously in the contentious budget delivered on August 13th, 2013. Sinckler, strikingly claimed that he was "*happy to lay*, along with this [Ministerial] statement, a report in matrix form, outlining the progress we [the DLP Cabinet and administration] have made to date on the implementation of the measures" announced in the August budget.

I thought that I heard incorrectly regarding the Minister Sinckler's self-referenced happiness in spite of the seriousness clouding the atmosphere in Barbados. From my perspective, numerous Barbadians anticipated that any statement coming from the Minister of Finance, with the IMF present in Barbados, and with the publicly vented talk of several thousands of persons to be sent packing from the civil service and statutory corporations, would be met with personal dispositions other than happiness especially from the Minister holding the dreadful cudgel. There is no way that Sinckler's ministerial foray, delivered in the august chamber of the Lower House of Assembly, could bring cheer to many in the public service, nor was any credible statement springing from the lips of this Member of Parliament for the

constituency of St. Michael North West capable of alleviating the fears and turmoil that I constantly heard Barbadians in the lead-up days discuss. Barbadians did not anticipate anything that could be said by Sinckler to be reinterpreted to bring a happy face regarding their livelihoods and survival. Barbadians usually thrive on enjoying the yuletide season with traditional cheer, but it was fast becoming obvious that the ill omen of unemployment would register with thousands even as Christmas and the New Year beckon.

Moments later my petulance at Chris Sinckler's seemingly mocking face and tone sufficiently subsided for me to hear a conceited rather than conciliatory delivery of the austere pie. This government minister refused to be quelled by the blow he was about to deliver to Barbadians. Minister Sinckler coughed up that he was "*happy to announce*" that the IMF has accepted requests to examine "the fiscal and operational challenges of some of our [Barbados'] key statutory entities" and for "a team of experts to conduct the long overdue comprehensive assessment of the direct and indirect tax systems in Barbados with a view to advising government on major reforms necessary in both tax policy and administration." This Minister spoke with unapologetic ease but his message resonated with a sadness

that was sure to rip Barbadians of the goodwill that they had seemingly invested in the minister, his prime minister and DLP colleagues. Barbados had now encountered the worse since those dark days between 1991 to 1994.

For many Barbadians, already buckling under the strains of joblessness and the economic malaise that progressively became entrenched since 2008, Sinckler's happiness immediately prompted the universal perception that political deception played a major part in the DLP's desperation to remain in government. On Friday last, there was a national sadness hovering across the length and breadth of Barbados, and this has transcended into the region and international diaspora.

Sinckler's proposition that "the reality" of Barbados' economic situation has compelled the DLP Cabinet "to adjust staff levels" in the public sector "in order to achieve our fiscal consolidation objectives" must be considered suspiciously. In dance terms, Sinckler's performance of the '6.30' is clearly a literal and figurative departure from the often touted DLP claims that no one would be sent home from the public sector and that every effort will be made to protect jobs. Indeed, it is logical to conclude that the cutbacks in health and education to the detriment of many Barbadians

individually and collectively, were parts of the sacrifices made to ensure that people would keep their jobs despite the public service not being able to receive pay increases since 2008.

It is apparent that Sinckler's debilitating and merciless economic disenfranchisement to workers in the central public service and in the statutory corporations is an unhappy situation and is casted in a cloak that is seemingly diametrical to Prime Minister Stuart's very recent incantation while reflecting upon his affinity to Morpheus. Stuart, the DLP, and to some extent the Governor of the Central Bank have been *ad idem* before and during the 2013 general elections, and as recent as two weeks ago, PM Stuart assured the Barbadian workers in the public sector and the unions that lay-offs in the public sector would be "a kind of last option when every other option has failed." Was there a hidden dagger being held by the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister? Did the IMF remove the dagger from its sheath given that even the unions are today suggesting that discussions have taken place but there were no decisions as touted by the government to send home 3, 000 or more workers in the flash of a moment?

Sinckler said that the traumatic dislocation of workers from the public

service was "now simply unavoidable." I ask readers to consider, based upon Sinckler's account and public pronouncements since he has been Minister of Finance, if Barbadians can trust so blindly and uncritical the caprice that can be teased out from the DLP's uncanny knack for wavering between promises and performances? Sending home workers would surely place Barbados in an unsavoury position. Barbadians are more likely to be exposed to harsh and austere IMF policy prescriptions. Can we, in this region, ever forget Jamaica and Guyana? The IMF intervened and the prescribed medicine for both countries from that institution bore similarities of long-term suffering, the erosion of social safety nets, prolonged economic hardships, increased crime, and the culmination of civil and political instability.

Ironically, PM Stuart is correct in his assertion that "Barbados is a small island developing state and therefore subject to external and internal vulnerabilities that dictate its options." However, it becomes reasonable to accept that Barbados' newly proposed engagement with the IMF as stated by Minister Sinckler throws up more concerns that it will likely dissipate the fears that are currently traumatising public sector workers, the private sector, and numerous elements within civil society. Will Barbados be additionally

challenged with significantly declining investor confidence due to what one can anticipate will be a volatile political and social climate, the template left over in several countries for which the IMF has doctored the situation? Quite a pity, that on the occasion of Friday, the Minister of Finance did not once mention Greece, Spain, or Italy to tell Barbadians what they could expect from IMF intervention.

Incidentally, and coupled with the discernible incapacity of the DLP Cabinet to steer Barbados to safe macroeconomic harbour, the Sinckler austerity measures on top of years of increased taxation, false alarms regarding the welcoming of new tourism and other projects, and the failures that have accompanied the international business sectors characterised by loss of clients, complaints from potential investors, and declining revenues for the treasury, have profusely damaged the hopes of Barbadians. The Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister of Tourism, and the key advisers such as the 'independent' Governor of the Central Bank have done little or nothing to inspire local confidence in the government's macroeconomic programmes and policies.

Sinckler told Barbadians that he was proposing "the process of

retrenchment be spread over the period January to March 2014, and be front-loaded starting with the first 2,000 job cuts by January 15th 2014, followed by the second tranche no later than March 1st 2014." Certainly, this untimely butchery and savagery to the hard-working people of this country could only be the first phase to use a Stuartian phrase. Furthermore, the options that can be relied upon by Barbados' ever-failing Minister of Finance are truly lessened only due to the perennial inertia that has become common to the 21st century DLP. This is at a time when it appears to most that countries in and outside of the region are on courses for economic recovery and growth by 2014. What has happened under Sinckler's watch of the Barbados economy? There were several opportunities for the DLP to have 'trusted' the people and worked towards meeting their expectations immediately before, during, and after the last general elections of February 21st, 2013.

But, no way! Sinckler and the DLP were not accepting responsibility for the state of Barbados' affairs, nor were messieurs Stuart and Sinckler ready to proactively engage the people with the economic and fiscal truths confronting Barbados. Barbados has witnessed a prioritisation of the DLP's interest over the national interest. The DLP, under the leadership of Freundel Stuart, is nakedly a political

party attempting to deflect all criticism away from its failed policies and spurious actions. Stuart's Cabinet, the largest and likely to be the most incompetent in the history of post-independent Barbados has repeatedly functioned as if it was more vital to safeguard its political survival than to embrace all Barbadians with truth and forthrightness.

With the upcoming retrenchment exercises, one has to be mindful that lack of transparency in the process set for commencement in January 2014, can and will likely cause greater angst among the labouring classes and, in turn, more reprehension served towards the DLP. This assertion is sound, to the extent that the August 2013 budget and the December 13th presentations by the Minister of Finance, have all but devastated the employment potential, hampered and halted career choices for Barbados' youth whose levels of unemployment are drastically much more than the national average which will return to abysmal numbers.

In difficult times, the reverse tax payment of \$1,300 that helped some of the poorest workers has been slashed by 50 percent (%). People are already forced into a compromising position to gather the tuition fees that will become necessary to access university education at the UWI. Additionally, there are several entrepreneurs,

numerous local and international investors, and a general public that will feel the negative ramifications of too many failed DLP programmes and an inappropriate social policy agenda. The DLP administration has failed to display necessary and timely political will when it mattered most, thus prompting many to suggest 'too little, too late'.

A political theorist once wrote that "politically speaking, a great part of all power consists in will." The DLP has demonstrated, at least over the past three to four years, that it is dismally lacking in political will. Perhaps, this partially explains the implementation deficit of the DLP administration. It becomes easier for Sinckler and the DLP Cabinet to blame the BLP or the recessionary periods that hit other parts of the world rather than man-up and fix the problems at home. Sinckler, Sealy, and Stuart have failed miserably in spite of the arrogance that has become a noticeable part of the DLP's mechanism for convincing Barbadians of the Stuart-led Cabinet's prowess or lack thereof. The unproductive slothfulness and crass procrastination, unabatedly, have been plain. This is, notwithstanding that the DLP's political rhetoric has been largely propagandist.

The DLP's actions in government have been characterised not by the

economic realities facing Barbadian workers, and especially public servants, come January 2014, but by the limp indecisiveness that marks Prime Minister Freundel Stuart; thus confirming his status of a sleeping giant abiding in a phase far removed from the ordinary and hardworking Barbadian wanting no more than job security and a meaningful livelihood. In real terms, the DLP Cabinet, perpetually, passed off its difficulties relating to the management of the Barbados economy on policy remnants inherited from the BLP, without realising that in our part of the world, government is viewed and functions as a continuum.

Each member of the Stuart-led Cabinet can and will often repeat the mantra that the DLP has governed effectively in spite of "the worst recession the world has seen for 100 years." Stability was spouted from the lips of government ministers as often as they could cite Greece, the UK, the USA, and Italy in terms of the issues faced by those countries. However, in the comparisons, there are hardly any utterances speaking in a clairvoyant manner, a path towards Barbados' recovery and sustainable growth.

No wonder that Barbadians in large numbers are expressing sentiments of deception and displeasure given the unaccounted seepage of foreign exchange to the tune of almost half a

billion dollars in a matter of a few months after the 2013 general elections. Public servants must now contemplate their best chances of survival while grappling with a government that could possibly remain well into 2018 given Stuart's record of an extreme violation regarding time and traditions. The stark reality is that the DLP laboured much too long past sunset on its ill-defined policies. There was the imprecision exacerbated by lack of clarity and vision in both social and economic policies. There remains a leadership style that is prone to stubborn reluctance with the government ministers refusing to listen to any individual, group, or entity that differs from the pie-in-the-sky promises put to Barbadians regardless of how seldom the leadership speaks.

The DLP's 2008 manifesto was a clear piece of evidence that the idealism of the DLP is worlds apart from the realities in Barbados and the international system. The 2013 DLP manifesto is stated to be a continuation of the DLP's intent, running over from the disastrous budget of 2008 in which the platform was laid for increased and burdensome taxation, thereby scaring regional and international contributors to the economy away from the shores of Barbados. The

route being followed by Stuart and Sinckler is perilous at best.

In fact, Minister Sinckler said that "Cabinet has agreed to institute a strict programme of attrition across the central public service, filling posts only where it is absolutely unavoidable, over the next five years, ending 2018-2019." Given that there are no objective indications that the Barbados economy will overcome its current crisis proportions until perhaps another five years, it is more reasonable to assume that darker days are yet on the horizon for Barbados and Barbadians. If on December 4th, 2013 PM Stuart could be saying that he was "not in a position to say that there will be lay-offs or that there will not be lay-offs because the Cabinet has not taken any decision on that issue," but his Minister of Finance could deliver nine days later a package of retrenchment full of details and data to support his actions, one could possibly infer that the DLP is no closer to solving the problems of Barbados, than George Brathwaite is close to conquering a climb of Mount Everest.

The DLP has managed to propel Barbados into a state of almost total macroeconomic disaster, from which, returning to prosperity will certainly demand new ideas, new personnel, and a new government not comprised of members of the DLP. Several members of Cabinet and the hierarchy

of the DLP sat in silence as the rug was pulled from beneath Barbadian public service workers. The DLP's 2013 drive for retaining the helm of government was built on a 'sandy' charade. The DLP under PM Stuart had pursued its post-2013 general election farce until June 2013. It was then, and only with the international institutions causing the local authorities to worry about the value and fixed rate of the Barbados dollar that the alarms were sounded.

Unfortunately, the DLP since 2008 had never set a pattern of timely and robust decision-making, far less moving for the swift implementation of solutions to the challenges facing Barbados. The DLP, in my humble opinion, has squandered the people's goodwill. Prime Minister Stuart has reverted to the classics while the world around us moved on, and especially here in the Caribbean in spite of similar types of problems that affect the economies. Regrettably, the DLP remains a political party tied to the idealistic inclinations of empty promises when purposeful action is decidedly a better option for recovery and development. By admitting and tackling the difficult circumstances much earlier, Sinckler and the DLP may have averted those phenomena that have now pushed Barbados backwards to 1991-1994. Barbados, still under Minister Sinckler, and unless PM Stuart reshuffles quickly, is

fast approaching the period of plight and distraught faced by Jamaicans to this day.

The Minister of Finance whilst being boastful at times, often appeared too keen to keep hidden those things which ought to have been debated in the open. On hindsight, Sinckler may come to the realisation that a mixture of arrogance and stubbornness may have plunged Barbados into an economic tailspin and a social calamity waiting to explode. Sinckler and the DLP's answer has been to uproot people from their jobs and send them home to wonder where the next loaf of bread will come from and if they will be able to pay their utility bills.

One can only hope that the Barbadian society, while being strict guardians of our heritage and firm craftsmen of our fate, would not allow the situation crafted by Messieurs Sinckler, Stuart, Boyce, Sealy, Worrell, Alleyne and others to cause the degeneration of Barbados anymore than is the current trajectory. A Cabinet Minister already has put into the public space an incendiary discourse that warrants heads to be cracked and people to be shot -- either as the sore reminder of the 1937 riots, or as a more palpable reaction to suggest that the BLP is culpable in situations which forced a DLP administration to resort to the

police and military for rescue purposes.

Surely the people of Barbados must utilise their collective power and decide whether it will be more profitable for them in the short, medium, and long terms to return to the polls than for the country and the citizens' livelihoods continue to plummet rapidly into a bottomless pit of economic quagmire and social dissidence. With the role of the IMF being amplified and given welcome by the Minister of Finance, not only has the DLP left much to be desired in terms of what would follow after this privileging of the IMF over indigenous talents, but there is a definite and stale air suggesting that Barbados' financial and economic affairs are worse off than many imagine or have been told by this DLP administration.