



**CIPRIANI COLLEGE**  
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

*Work Matters*  
**The Cipriani College Column**

**Resetting Social Dialogue in Trinidad and Tobago**

In the run up to the elections in 2015, the PNM signed a memorandum of understanding with representatives of the labour movement. In March 2016, the Government, private sector and trade union movement launched the National Tripartite Advisory Committee (NTAC). By March 2021, the trade union movement had withdrawn from the NTAC and it effectively collapsed. The Trinidad Guardian of 14 March noted that there was “unfinished work” and that is true.

The demands of modern governance are becoming increasingly complicated and complex, which challenge traditional patterns of engagement and the solutions which result. The competing interests in society can be expected to become even more evident and sharp. Indeed, sometimes even when there is agreement of some general outcome, threading the needle to arrive at a solution is fraught with risk. Further, there are many steps and hazards between the identification of a desired future and arriving there, regardless of the stated end-goals. Working through the COVID-19 Pandemic is a clear and present example of these challenges.

These challenges create a space for continuing, evolving and complex social dialogue, nationally, regionally and internationally. Wide involvement in the governance process has many values including consensus building, participation and responsiveness; with social dialogue being a significant contributor to this process.

But social dialogue is not easy.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines social dialogue to “include all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy”.

A social dialogue process can endure and produce tangible results. There are two examples in the Caribbean that are instructive. The more well-known and longer lasting is Barbados’ “social partnership”, while the less well-known is Grenada’s “social compact”.

The Barbados social partnership dates from the early nineties, emanating from an initiative of the private sector and the labour movement in the face of an existential threat to economic and social

stability (the spectre of an IMF intervention with the expectation of devaluation of the Barbadian dollar); where later, the Government came on board.

To better ensure the success for social dialogue is a clear identification of an objective. In the case of Barbados, it was to keep the IMF out and protect the currency. I suggest that the NTAC experiment may have been too unfocused to start with, especially in a country in which there is low systemic trust.

It is useful to compare the NTAC experience with the country's experience in 2020, which resulted in the Roadmap for Recovery. Here, the problem and leadership commitment were clearly articulated, as was the intent to effectively respond to the pandemic.

The similarity between the Barbados experience of the nineties and ours with the roadmap to recovery are instructive and those lessons can inform an NTAC reboot or some other alternative for national consultations.

Naturally, one of the first steps will be to persuade the trade union movement to return to the table; which may require the good offices of an independent party.

Firstly, I think that the rules of the game may not have been sufficiently defined in the first iteration in 2016. Plain talk, bad manners: a social dialogue process is not an alternative form of government. At the end of the day, a government is a government and may or may not choose to follow the recommendations of the social partners. That does not mean that the process is flawed or useless.

Second, I suggest that a pre-agreement on some specific achievable objectives that are important to all parties is required. Working conditions in the context of COVID-19 maybe a good place to start. Further, efforts should be made to avoid having such an expansive agenda that focus gets diluted and the risk of extraneous issues cloud the process. Third, every effort should be made to have discussions that are evidenced-based, requiring a strong research and analysis capacity for decision-making (such as benchmarking of good practice in the areas under consideration).

Fourth, it is strongly recommended that the Head of Cabinet should be directly involved in some way in the process to ensure institutional buy-in and commitment to the process, especially as social dialogue issues cut across portfolios.

The question arises on how can we make a process of social dialogue in Trinidad and Tobago work for the benefit of our people. In our own case the society is marked by sharp divisions. Our multi-ethnic society, which many romantically tout as a source of pride, is in fact one of our greatest weaknesses when it comes to governance. These challenges of governance and our fractured political culture make the process of social dialogue so much harder but it makes the need for dialogue even greater.

Let's try to continue this important work.

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