



WORK MATTERS

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COLUMN

“Qu’ils mangent de la brioche”

Let them eat cake! The original phrase - “Qu’ils mangent de la brioche”— was alleged to have been uttered by Queen Marie-Antoinette during the French Revolution. Although, now infamously translated as “let them eat cake,” the English translation is in actuality “let them eat brioche” – a pastry *that resembles bread, but is made with milk, butter, and eggs.*

There is no historical evidence to substantiate the claim that these were in fact the words of Marie-Antoinette, however the allegation has long been utilised as an allegory illustrating the disconnect of the elite. The most popular account of the event is that this was the Queen’s retort after being told that her servants were starving. She might as well have been making a contribution during the debate on the 2023 Budget Statement in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

Back in 2016, when Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert joked tongue in cheek that “they have not rioted yet”, there was a missed opportunity to commend an otherwise rebellious population for taking on additional responsibility to steady the ship as the country was faced the lowest oil prices in decades. Instead, the comment demonstrated callousness and disregard for the burden that the majority of the population was about to carry. What should have been taken as an opportunity to galvanize a community was instead reduced to one-line quip! Testament to leadership which had disconnected itself due to indifference or disregard, or possibly outright contempt.

The country had barely come to terms with these adjustments and found itself grappling with the challenges of a global pandemic. It can be debated but I don’t share the view that the country was grossly indisciplined. In large part the population adhered to the public health orders but the most critical display of understanding of the situation was in the demonstrations of restraint by the tens of thousands who had lost their income without any real indication of when they could get back to normalcy. The ability of the population to adapt and ‘make do’ with what they had ought to have been seen as a

strength, deserving of commendation. These references are made because a person who had been paying attention would hardly be surprised by the sound bites which came out of the budget debate in the lower house of the Parliament. It seems as if some of the Finance Minister’s colleagues took his comments from 2016 as a challenge to push the envelope and gas light a population which had endured more than they have been given credit for. Devoid of empathy and a general sense of the conditions under which much of the population have lived for the last two years, it appears that several MPs set out on a mission to let loose the dogs of war.

The irony really lies in the fact that this year the country celebrates sixty years as an independent nation, free of colonial rule; characterised by situations of gross worker abuse, low wages, high unemployment and underemployment, unbridled racism, economic depression and an unacceptable living standard of majority of the working class. The display in the Parliament suggests that there are still fundamental issues of governance which remain unresolved.

The merits and demerits of the fiscal measures will no doubt dominate the discourses on the budget statement in other responses. The intent here to suggest that a deeper interrogation is required of the process of arriving at the statement and the subsequent understanding of the role of the very Government itself. The preoccupation with the enthrals of electioneering has seen the country forgo other key questions of governance only to accept the right to vote as sufficient.

The utterances of some of the Ministers during the debate were not just unfortunate but spoke to their own understanding of the relationship between themselves and the persons whom they represent. Instead of speaking on behalf of their constituencies they spoke as if appointed by a long-gone Governor whose favour they coveted in order to maintain their standing in the Legislative Council. It is farcical that in a Parliamentary Democracy, it is still unclear as to who these Parliamentar-

ians represent when they speak. Surely not one of them sought guidance from their burgesses to give voice to the voiceless on such a critical matter of state. Instead, they made they made public their private contempt for the electorate and that must not be dismissed so easily.

As the country moves forward there must be a discussion on the roles of our representatives. All Governments have been culpable. The fundamental structure of the Parliament and our understanding of governance must change. As CLR James put it, we seek to elect good men and women who soon become men and women who are no good. The process of August 31st 1962 is incomplete and this must be the focus of our collective efforts as we move toward the next 60 years.

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