

The Independence Journey

The date of November 30, 1966 is one that is etched in the minds of Barbadians. This is because it the birthday of the nation. It is celebration of the attainment of political independence from the colonial British Empire. This freedom meant that Barbados as a sovereign nation, has its own constitution for the governance of the country and its people.

Now at age fifty two, Barbados as a small island developing state is said to have achieved much. Its social and political systems have worked well. The island provides and delivers social services to its people. As an island state which has little natural resources, its economy continues to be built around foreign investments and capital inflows. As a consequence the island state places a premium on health and education. Its human resources capital is invaluable to the development of the nation. The added value to its having an educated and skilled workforce, is its infrastructural development which is seemingly comparable to that seen in other developed western societies. This has made it attractive to visitors, investors and international organizations as a place to visit, live and do business. The fact that the country prides itself on maintaining a high level of political stability transmits a positive statement to nations across the world.

To its credit, Barbados as a small island independent state has become a world leader in many ways, but most importantly, can pride itself on the promotion of constitutional, human rights and workers' rights. It has given birth to many individuals who have become world renown in areas such as sports, entertainment, culture, politics, business and trade unionism. In the context of all of the above, the island's achievements are phenomenal.

With respect to time, the nation's independence journey has only just begun. The notion that the birth of independence and its annual celebration is submerged in the role which politicians and politics played in the achievement of the attainment of political independence, is but a narrow perspective. The important role which those who in pre independence days advocated on the behalf of labour and subsequently trade unionists after came to the fore in the 1940's, cannot be overstated. Historians would direct attention to the workers' advocates of the 1930's who pressed for the social, economic and political upliftment of the masses.

It is now well known that the now late national heroes the Right Excellencies Sir Grantley Hugh Herbert Adams and Sir Hugh Springer who started as labour activists, graduated to trade union leaders. It is also a fact that they subsequently turned politicians. The latter is however understandable, given that it became evident that they needed to become a member of Parliament, if they were going to be able to influence change.

These leaders fought the good fight. It may be true that they had their individual political partisan leaning, but to their credit, it was seen that their behaviour and actions were beyond reproach. This speaks volumes to the ethics they had, the dignity of office which they displayed and the subsequent respect they earned. In the post independent Barbados, national hero, the late Right

Excellent Sir Frank Leslie Walcott, following on their footsteps. His quality of leadership was entrenched in his identification tag which said, 'Frank in name and Frank in nature.'

As stated earlier, with independence has come some known freedoms. The freedom of speech is one that is to be cherished but certainly not abused. The right to be represented is one that every citizen has. In blending the two of these, our trade union leaders have been given a license to honourably represent the interest of working class people. Over time many questions have been raised about the intentions and actions of some of our trade union leaders. It is claimed that some have used the cover of freedom of speech and the right to represent the interest of working class to promote their own interest and agenda. On the other hand, those and others who may such a claim, seem to have conveniently forgotten how politicians whether in government or opposition, abuse the use of parliamentary privilege, covered under the name of freedom of speech, in supposedly representing the interest of the nation.

Is the society not its worst enemy by not speaking out against this, but rather seemingly wanting to encourage it because of narrow political interest? Are we prepared to sit back and justify inaction based on the fact that through independence the constitution has given us freedom of expression? Let us not forget, that there nothing call absolute freedom.

The road ahead and our destiny is shaped by what we say and do today. Trade union leaders in particular, should avoid having accusations laid against them that they are doing an injustice to their calling. There is no room for blowing hot and cold. Our leaders must be prepared to speak out against perceived injustices on the part of any political administration.

Independence may mean different things to different people, but truth be told, it embodies pride, commitment and above all loyalty. These are all reinforced in the national anthem of Barbados. For what it is worth, trade union leaders ought to recognize the important role labour which labour has played in the pre and post-independence era. The achievements made were accomplished through unity of purpose and effort. In the journey ahead, labour leaders should envisage that any achievements for labour will only come through a sense of commitment to unification. This means working together as loyal sons and daughters all.