

Chapter Five

The Long Road to a Mature Nation

There is of course no precise definition of a mature nation. Nations are so different in terms of people, economy, culture, resources, size and history. But you know a mature nation when you see one. Singapore is a prime example of a mature nation. New Zealand is another small country with significant maturity. Mid size mature nations include the Scandinavian countries particularly Norway. But I will stop there because the purpose of this book is not to compare St. Kitts and Nevis with any other country.

St. Kitts and Nevis is a young nation and one of the smallest in the world in physical size and population with limited natural resources and serious natural disaster risks. It began life as a nation only 40 years ago with a weak economy and little support from the colonizers. Despite these challenges the nation has the potential to grow and mature.

I begin with the preamble to the Constitution of St. Kitts and Nevis which sets out very explicitly what type of nation our people want.

The Preamble

*WHEREAS the People of Saint Christopher and Nevis –
declare that the nation is established on the belief in Almighty God and the inherent
dignity of each individual; assert that they are entitled to the protection of fundamental
rights and freedoms; believe in the concept of true democracy with free and fair
elections; desire the creation of a climate of economic wellbeing in the context of respect
for law and order; and are committed to achieve their national objectives with a unity of
purpose;...*

It is unquestionable that the declarations, beliefs and commitments in the Preamble are a good guide to the achievement of a mature nation.

The first declaration supports the pursuit of maturity because belief in Almighty God and the inherent dignity of each individual should provide a good direction. The first declaration should stimulate the true pursuit of the four other commitments set out in the preamble.

It is very sad to note that the last of the declarations has been the least respected. That commitment to achieve the national objectives with a unity of purpose has been non-existent because of the political polarization of the country. That polarisation has from day one transcended all norms of democracy and political competition. It has permeated every aspect of life in the country.

A perfect recent example of the party above country mentality is the lack of response of the public to the disclosure by Prime Minister Drew in Parliament that between 2008 and 2022 the government received direct revenue of 5.678 billion Eastern Caribbean dollars from the CBI. In most democracies this would have led to a public outcry for Drew to give full disclosure of all the carefully buried facts relating to the CBI including how much additional money was generated for government by the Sugar Industry Diversification Fund, how many passports have been issued since the program began, how many diplomatic passports have been issued and most importantly you would expect a call for an accounting of how the money was spent. But hardly an eyelid has been batted.

The question whether with that type of money the country should not already be a Sustainable Island State has not been widely asked. Nor have the questions been asked of why with such billions we are still without a good hospital, why are the mental health facilities virtually non-existent, why are the St. Kitts electricity and water services archaic, why has the

airport terminal been allowed to become outgrown by airline arrivals, why have the schools and so many important public buildings been allowed to decay and why is there no established disaster relief fund. These questions lie buried in the political culture. The obvious reason for such resonating silence is that the period of the revenue crosses party lines. Labour (in coalition with NRP for part of that time) held government from 2008 to 2015. Unity (PAM, CCM and PLP) held government from 2015 to 2022. Each tribe had an equal seven years. So no political party will rock the boat. The country is none the wiser and seems to be happy that way.

How do we put the past behind us and achieve the unity of purpose that we claim to be committed to? I suggest we take the advice of two highly respected leaders.

Advice of P. J. Patterson

We could do well to heed the warning given by former Jamaica Prime Minister P.J Patterson to the joint sitting of the Jamaican Parliament held in November 2012 to pay tribute to him. He said *'We must abandon the adversarial approach of the past and replace it with a consensual form of politics to embrace the best ideas regardless of the political quarters from which these ideas originate. I underline this problem to warn of the dangers ahead.... If we fail to posture a political environment that discourages the brightest minds to participate in the political process, we are placing our democracy at risk.'* The former Prime Minister added that politicians *'have contributed to our sad state of affairs by our utterances here and on public platforms.'*

Advice of President Obama

President Obama had the answer: *'We long for unity, but we are unwilling to pay the price. But of course, true unity cannot be so easily won. It starts with 'a change in attitudes - a broadening of our minds and a broadening of our hearts'.*

We need to take President Obama's words seriously. Our country needs direct and honest self-evaluation. The desire for unity of purpose does not mean that we must abandon the adversarial system of politics. Politics can be adversarial but issue based, strong but civil. It does not mean that we must abandon individual ambition and enterprise. It means that we must identify the issues on which there should be a truly national debate, for example sustainable economic growth, the CBI, land use, health, education, productivity, attitudes, crime. It means that civil society must wake up and play its intended role. It means that we must put principles above men.

The Preamble should be taught in the schools and colleges and debated not only on the political platform but also in the media and by Civil Society organizations. What kind of country do the people really want?

A sustainable economy is an important but not the only ingredient of a mature nation. I address this in a separate chapter. There are several wealthy countries where democracy does not exist or is at threat, where the rule of man or the rule of a party prevails over the rule of law and where the people are totally subdued. There are other wealthy countries which claim to be democracies but in which racism and violence prevail.

Other indispensable ingredients of a mature nation are food security, good healthcare and social services, an educated, motivated, productive and enlightened population, a strong democracy, entrenched fundamental rights, free and fair elections, a transparent and accountable system of governance, reliable utilities, communication and public services, an independent media and an impactful Civil Society. These help create financial security, stability, peace, a healthy population and a good quality of life. These ingredients all fall within the objectives professed in the Preamble.

I believe that St. Kitts and Nevis is capable of ultimately achieving maturity as a nation and has made strides since independence but there is a tough road and steep challenges ahead especially in the changes of politics and reform of the public service and changes of attitudes generally needed. I set out in subsequent chapters to describe that road in the context of the Preamble to the constitution, to look frankly at the stumbles and pitfalls experienced over the last 40 years, to express my views on the weaknesses and challenges they have exposed and to suggest how we can convert our beautiful country into a settled and mature democracy and nation.