

Chapter Seven

The Practice of Democracy in St. Kitts and Nevis

True democracy is the genuine practice of democratic principles, not just laws and talk about them. It is not just about elections. It doesn't work on the turn of a switch. It is very much like many human skills. If you do not practice them you lose them. The preservation and strength of democracy are heavily dependent on the human qualities and the mentality which pervade the society. Practice of tolerance, mutual respect, community spirit, fairness, integrity, unselfishness, honesty, understanding, independence of thought are some of the positive human qualities required. The qualities and mentality which challenge true democracy include greed, love of power, ego, hate, dishonesty, divisiveness, inefficiency, arrogance.

Respect for democratic principles is required from the people and the politicians. Democracy is only as strong as the respect which those who seek office through it and the people generally have for it.

Truth is the foundation of democracy. Strangers to the truth often seek to create their own reality to influence the electorate and obtain power. Continuation of alternate realities or lies then threaten democracy because democracy does not sit well with lies and false propaganda. Totalitarianism is often the inevitable result to maintain the false reality. While on the positive side they promote free speech and public discourse, social media and the expansion of communication offered by the internet and technology provide mechanisms to spread false realities. It is even more important therefore that a people who cherish their democracy find a way to distinguish between truth and falsehood. That is a major challenge to our democracy.

India, despite all its other problems, is a good example of respect for democracy. That country held an election in May- June 2024 in which 642 million people voted over seven weeks

to elect 543 Parliamentarians. Imagine if the St. Kitts and Nevis election took even one week how much confusion there would be. The election results have been accepted by the Indian population.

The UK is another good example with its unwritten constitution and respect for conventions. Conventions are rules that do not have the force of law but are respected by all governments, all political parties and the people. Many of these rules are unwritten.

One of the most notable of these is the convention which requires the Prime Minister to resign when it is clear that he does not command a majority of the House of Commons. He does not wait on a Motion of No Confidence. Another is that a Minister must resign when he misleads Parliament or to clear his name when there is a publicly debated challenge to his integrity.

There is a Cabinet Manual in the UK which contains a guide to laws, conventions and rules on the operation of government. There is a Ministerial Code which sets out the standards of conduct expected of Ministers. The strength of those conventions is that the public expects them to be followed and will punish at the polls any Government or Parliamentarian who does not. That is a powerful component of the British system. A written constitution cannot cover every situation. A true democracy requires leaders to do the honourable thing. Why else are they called Honourable. And the strength of a democracy lies in the commitment of the people to hold their leaders to honourable standards of behavior. We happily adopted the fanciful British system of titles like Honourable but we have not been so great at adopting other more meaningful conventions. St. Kitts and Nevis needs to develop its system of conventions to supplement the constitution and the law.

The Political Culture

The primary damaging feature of the culture is the favoritism in government for party supporters and the resulting attitude that you should only be productive when the political party you support is in power.

Then there is the handout mentality that comes from the quest for long term power which too often prevails over the needs of the country. Successive governments have regarded handouts as more important than infrastructure development hence, despite the billions in CBI revenue, the poor state of our electricity and water systems which have not been properly maintained or upgraded to meet the growing demand. Our health system has likewise suffered.

The extent to which the handout mentality is embedded in the mentality of our people is graphically reflected by the member of our society who complained about his removal from one of the government handout programs because his earnings exceed the qualifying threshold. He complained bitterly that the handout he would no longer receive had become his savings every month and were banked by him.

We need policies focused on Government giving a hand up to those in need rather than the handouts that have become so embedded and are routinely expected.

Attitude of Politicians

True democracy hangs very heavily on the attitude of political leaders who exert strong influence within communities and electorates.

Active Participation by the People

Participation in the electoral process is often regarded as the main form of participation by the people in the democratic processes but it is not the only one. Equally important is continuous active participation of the people rather than waiting every four or five years to exercise their franchise in an election.

But even voting is too often regarded as a nuisance. There can in our system be up to 206 days between elections and people still feel inconvenienced by having to devote one day to voting.

Compromise

Democracy requires compromise. Excessive political partisanship undermines democracy by the uncompromising fixation on the party tribe. Nowhere in our constitution will you see the term political party. Political parties are of course an integral part of our system but they do a disservice to democracy when party loyalty is the pervasive requirement on all issues. Our democracy has benefited from politicians leaving parties and changing allegiance. But even that has not cured the tribalism.

Direct Democracy

One of the major challenges with our system is that it entrenches majority power and totally shuts out the minority. This can lead to political tensions because oppositions develop the attitude of opposing everything the government does. For this reason we should consider adopting elements of direct democracy in the form of the issue ballot or the referendum in which the electorate is given the right to express its opinion on specific issues. One such issue has been suggested as the overseas vote. But there are many other decisions on which by statutory compulsion or choice the Government should consult the people. Other such issues would be term limits for the Prime Minister and Representatives, the move to a Republic and the replacement of the Privy Council by the Caribbean Court of Justice as our final Court of Appeal. Other contentious proposals of Government should be resolved in this way as should important social and cultural issues.

We are no strangers to referenda. The Constitution provides for referenda to change certain sections of the Constitution. A secession referendum was held in Nevis in 1997. The recent history of referenda has not been good for ruling parties in the Eastern Caribbean but that in itself is a strong argument for holding them. Direct consultation of the people on specific issues is the purest form of democracy and should be expanded as suggested above.

Political Tribalism

A huge challenge to our becoming a true democracy is the tribal politics that pervades our culture and has done so since 1967. Even allowing for the relatively short period of self-rule and for the complexities of democracy, St. Kitts and Nevis has thus far failed to achieve real maturity in its constitutional democracy. This is in large measure because of the deep and bitter political tribalism which by all standards, regional and international, is unhealthy and damaging. That tribalism has exposed and aggravated the basic weaknesses in the constitution. It has demonstrated all the vulnerabilities of democracy and the flaws of human nature referred to above.

A very distinguished public servant who worked at length under the first two Governments after independence said this to me about politicians: 'I have learnt that politicians don't create political systems. Instead political systems create the politicians. So that the politicians created by the system tend to become very similar over time.'

Follow the Leader

Most human beings are by nature followers rather than questioners. Often large numbers of people are so captivated by the influence of a leader or a political party or by allegiance to a group, be it because of family tradition or for ethnic, social or ideological reasons, that they fail to question the plans and ideas presented by the party they support or to listen to the opposing

views. They follow blindly. Hence attitudes can limit the effectiveness of a democracy and where the prevailing attitudes of a country permit, its democracy can be usurped by ruthless or power-hungry individuals. Franklin Roosevelt thought that the real safeguard of democracy is education. But history has shown that view to be simplistic. Education does not necessarily overcome the tribe mentality nor, it seems from the early evidence of the Information Age, does the exceedingly ready access to information provided by modern technology. St. Kitts and Nevis boasts a literacy rate above 90 per cent and has universal, free secondary education but you would not believe that based on the politics alone.

Civil Society

It is said, and I agree, that a country is only as strong as its civil society. Civil society should by its influence contribute to the checks and balances on the executive. Its organs should promote good governance and the responsible exercise of democratic freedoms and fundamental rights. The civil society of St. Kitts and Nevis has been relatively ineffectual because the political tribalism has embedded itself within the constituent bodies and many who are unaffected by tribalism keep quiet out of fear. Many of the politicians appear to give deference to civil society but, below the surface, they seek to undermine the organisations. For example, some members of the Bar Association have from time to time refused to participate in its activities because they put party politics above their professional duties. If lawyers are so narrow minded and cowed one should not be surprised that many others in civil society are the same. The doctors are not organized and do not speak with one voice even on health issues affecting the country. Business organisations such as the Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the Hotel and Tourism Association have not been as impactful as they should be on matters of national importance. As a result civil society has not contributed as it should to the promotion of democracy.

Comments of the 1998 Constitutional Commission

Sir Fred Phillips was the first Governor of the Associated State of St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla. After he demitted that office, he was an outstanding constitutional lawyer and regionalist who contributed to the jurisprudence of the region. He served in various other capacities in the private and public sectors up to his late eighties. Sir Fred was appointed by the Government of St. Kitts and Nevis to head a Constitutional Commission which reported, after wide consultation, in 1998 and a Constitutional Task Force which also consulted widely and reported in 1999 with recommendations on very substantial changes to the Constitution.

The Task Force noted as follows on the political divisions within the country:

The country is incredibly polarized. Virtually everything - a word spoken, to whom it is spoken, a phrase, a proposal – is scrutinized through a political magnifying glass for signs and signals, and thus for political and other attitudes and agendas. We are certain that the country wastes too much time and energy, which it cannot afford, on such activity

In another section of the report the political polarization was referred to as the ‘demon of political polarization.’ The Phillips Reports are gathering dust on a shelf somewhere in Government Headquarters. I could give thousands of examples of the extreme polarization but I prefer to look forward.

Where To From Here

The people of St. Kitts and Nevis do not suffer from disputes over race or ethnicity or religion or land or resources. The vast majority of the people have the same history, the same heritage and the same culture. Despite differences over the years the people of St. Kitts and Nevis are for the most part related by blood. Yet three times in 50 years we have had national crises that could have torn the country apart. We were fortunate in 1967 and in 1993 that the

violence was stopped without deaths. A national effort ensued in 1994 with the Four Seasons Accord setting out a basis for corrective action but the agreements were soon ignored by the political parties who were interested only in elections. We were fortunate in 2015 that our legal system saved the day without the crisis over the Motion of No Confidence descending into violence. We may not be so fortunate the next time especially with the proliferation of guns and the growing violence in the country.

We are as a country at crossroads. We can keep the 60 year old attitude of our leaders that there is nothing wrong so long as they win the election. We can continue with business as usual and stutter along towards the next crisis. Or we can be brave and take the tough decisions and promote the changes that are needed.