

Reparations: Brains Down and Palms Up

By Jeddy Fenton and David Edgecombe

On Thursday July 16, 2014, Professor Sir Hillary Beckles, chairman of the Caricom Reparations Commission, addressed the House of Commons of Great Britain. He received a standing ovation and the plaudits of many across Caricom.

The Knight Professor presented his Commission's position that physical slavery was an egregious act of nation/tribal/racial abuse that demands compensation beyond the mere acknowledgement that it was a multi-nation atrocity.

Slavery was not the whole story as the professor made clear. There was full-scale genocide of the indigenous peoples, betrayal in emancipation, indentured servitude, continuous exploitation and debasement in colonialism and neo-colonialism. The Caribbean has seen more acts of savage abuse than most 21st Century societies would openly tolerate. The question is, should nations be held accountable for the acts of their savage ancestors?

Abuse, like reparations, is subjective. Christians, for example, might say slavery was a blessed thing—because of it God was introduced to Caricom. Economists might say it was a necessary thing. Aristocrats might condemn the troublemakers who insist on reminding us of this past. Businessmen and politicians may believe that we got democracy and so should not be complaining. Ordinary people might say that, because of intermixing, almost all of us have the DNA of ex-slaveholders as well as ex-slaves. Commonsense tells us it is impossible to determine whether our societies are worse off because of slavery.

While civilized people might agree slavery was, and is, the lowest expression of man's inhumanity to man they must also agree that history is a purged record of the abuse conducted by nation-tribes on other nation-tribes told from the biased

perspectives of historians. Even the most ingenious extrapolations of the consequences of such abuse are ingenuous at best and self-serving in practice.

Speeches aside, any “reparations” agreed upon because of slavery will be so arbitrary it would be more accurately termed, charity to atone for feelings of incivility by slaveholder nations. It *might* be an offensive overstatement to say that charity begins and ends at home but charity is a defective, expensive cover for any feelings of guilt by economic slaveholders.

For certain, we should condemn slavery, in all of its insidious forms, at every opportunity. But we should know that sometimes the slaver’s manacles and handcuffs have been so long in place that we are mentally and emotionally adjusted to their restrictions and would feel naked without them. We are convinced that the slaver’s whip is for our own good. Therein lies our real challenge. How to break out of those manacles?

Thoughtful economic historians say slavery was abolished more from economic necessity than from any moral epiphany—the technology of the time made slave labor more costly than hired labor. If that is true then there is a distressing lack of sophistication in the aims and methods of the Caricom Reparations Committee.

Consider this, slavery might have been based on the very popular belief that there is genius in getting something for nothing. Widespread as that belief may be, it is a cruel delusion. It may be difficult or impossible to break the grip that our delusions have on our minds and behavior but we must ask ourselves why our economies go from crisis to crisis and almost always spend time far below their potential? Why are poverty and inequality so pervasive in human societies? Why are the richest, like the poorest; the strongest, like the weakest; the brightest, like the warriors—all living below their potential?

If we never have to earn our way but food is brought to our table, our minds dull,

our muscles atrophy, we become obese and our bodies are more likely to be stricken with diabetic, cardiac, and other diseases. Perhaps our societies function and malfunction just like our minds and bodies.

Sir Hilary and his team of fine minds will surely argue that “reparations” is not getting something for nothing. It is settlement of a debt that has been owed far too long. What exactly is this thing that some of us pursue with such energy and determination? Whatever it may be, will there ever come a time that we ask: is this the best use of our resources?

In the Caribbean we love splendor and style and ‘speechification’. There's nothing wrong with that, until we begin mistaking it for action that could improve the condition of our lives.

Sir Hillary's stated purpose is not grandiose. The commission he heads was chosen by the Caricom heads of government and charged with finding the evidence and preparing the case for what they call 'reparatory justice'. He told Parliament he and his colleagues "have worked with our governments in order to bring this case before you". And he asked them to "respond with humility and openness when your government receives an invitation to meet with our governments in summit in order to discuss this matter."

The matter is in fact “the Caricom Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice”.

That's it. Sir Hilary raised the matter of reparations, but there can be no real case for trying to repair history. Nobody knows how—especially in our case where it is impossible to determine who was wronged specifically, by whom specifically and in specifically what ways.

"This process," (of discussing reparatory justice) Beckles assured parliament, "will bring honour and dignity to the people of the Caribbean as well as to the people of

Great Britain and Europe.

"We must believe in the corrective power of this Parliament to respond positively to this present challenge, and in the process free itself from the bondage of its own sins and crimes. Without this belief, our journey here this evening would be lacking integrity, and without a doubt, would be a useless exercise."

Sir Hilary displays here a profound misunderstanding of capitalism and Western and Eastern social structures, but perhaps shouldn't be blamed for this. Slavery was indeed an uncivilized and un-civilizing catastrophe that created many victims including the sons and daughters of the former slavers. We are all victims of the primitive, evolutionary, mind-bogglingly inefficient system called capitalism.

When Britain says no, as it most assuredly will, not to the requested summit with Caricom but to reparations itself, what will our next move be? Will we ask those who sympathize with our position to go on strike? Hold candle light vigils across England and Europe and the rest of the world?

Let us remember Britain agreed to pay reparations before. The main beneficiaries then, were the slaveholders. Some have argued that the slaves were worse off because they were subject to slaveholder morality, laws and economy. In any game the players need chips and the slaves had none. They depended on the morality, conscientiousness, sense of justice, and the miraculous alteration of the historical behavior of slaveholder nations. What has changed?

But perhaps the proposal isn't serious as this passage from the professor's address suggests:

"Take also the very aristocratic and very distinguished Cumberbatch family. It has now produced the brilliant young actor, Benedict Cumberbatch (who I would love to meet one day). Benedict's grandfather owned the estate on which my beloved great

grandmother worked all her adult life. They enslaved my family on their Cleland plantation in the parish of St. Andrew. My great grandmother, who helped to raise me, and who we all called 'mammy', carried the name Adriana Cumberbatch. The actor and academic are joined therefore by a common past and present, and maybe, common blood!"

This is cute, but is it serious? Serious brown nosing is what it is.

Our academic's sentiments notwithstanding, when our heads of governments arrive at the Reparations Summit with their cups to meet the Europeans with their pounds and euros, it could never be a meeting of equals. Such is the reality of our world.

Yet, there is some possibility the Europeans while strenuously rejecting "reparations", will agree to some aid and/or trade treaties consistent with what they have done in the past. No doubt administered through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank.

But aid, real or imagined, has proved to be an ineffective strategy towards prosperity or even sufficiency. Haiti, the British Caribbean, the US Caribbean, the Southern United States, the majority of African Nations demonstrate this. Trade agreements cannot be in conflict with existing treaties, Capitalism, or American greed. Not one country ever became self-sufficient on aid. Reparations, real or imagined, must not be a goal to which we commit too much more of our time and energy.

If Caribbean intellectuals and politicians pay more careful attention to economics they would not be engaging in this quixotic misadventure. They would rather be seeking to reorganize their economies. Jamaicans say that in 1962 their population and per capita income were the same as Singapore's. In 2014 Singapore a much smaller country than Jamaica has twice the population and 10 times the per capita income. Jamaica has received far more "AID" than Singapore. This should tell us

plenty.

Lee Kuan Yew (who became the first Prime Minister of Singapore) went to Jamaica to study the Jamaican economy. He was not content to look to economic theories and university professors or Wall Street Gurus or United Nations Advisors or the IMF or the World Bank to find out what works. The evidence was overwhelming that none of these sources was dependable. He looked around and learned around. And he put into action a plan that is now its own incredible testimony.

We must bring better thinking and imagination to the business of building the Caribbean. We must breakout of the restrictions our sad history has imposed on us.

Sir Hilary tells us:

“Britain, and its Parliament, cannot morally and legally turn their back...and walk away from the mess they have left behind. This Parliament has to return to the scene of its crimes, and participate in the healing and rehabilitation of the Caribbean.

“We cannot, and should not, be asked to do this by ourselves.”

But, Professor that is precisely what we must do: assume the full responsibility for our own healing and development. Success may not be easy or immediate but it is guaranteed if we use our intelligence, imagination and energy and get away from slaveholder scripts.

We must choose better options. Do something similar to what Singapore did or find our own way. What we have been doing leads to perpetual dependency. Time to abandon that path and find the road to true independence and economic health. For example, we can wipe out illiteracy in Jamaica and Caricom within five years if we put our minds to it and without having to go to Britain with our brains turned down

and our palms turned up.

Likewise, we can dramatically improve health delivery in Barbados and Caricom by putting into place a plan to do so, just as Cuba established in 1997 Havana's Latin American Medical School, the largest medical school in the world, to train doctors to provide quality healthcare to some of the most underserved regions on earth. Those are just two examples taken from what Sir Hilary is advocating Britain needs to do for us.

Let us be clear on this, there are better ways for the Caribbean to move forward than by taking a 'Hail Mary Pass' at reparations. We can find smarter ways to use our own brains and muscles instead of finding more clever ways to beg. If we make our own plans and assume responsibility for carrying them out we will build capabilities that we couldn't if Britain grants every one of Caricom's requests for "reparatory justice".

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