

Lloyd Best, LNG and Jamaica-T&T relations

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In this week's column I propose to review four items that appeared in the Jamaican press in the week of March 25-30, and their coverage in the T&T press in the same week. I use this to make some observations on relations between the two countries and within Caricom.

The first two items were about Lloyd Best, who had a close connection to Jamaica. Lloyd worked on the Mona Campus in 1959-1961, after finishing his studies in economics in Britain. At Mona, he immersed himself in West Indian economic history and sociology, and began to develop the ideas that were to result in his theory of Plantation Economy. He inspired the formation of the 'West Indian Society for the Study of Social Issues', the precursor of the New World Group.

During his second stint at the Mona I.S.E.R. in 1964-1966, Best was also Managing Editor of *New World Quarterly*, the influential Pan-Caribbean journal of the 1960s. He helped to organise the famous UWI studies in regional integration. After that he was a frequent visitor to Jamaica and was well-known in Jamaican intellectual and political circles.

On March 23 the *Daily Gleaner* published an editorial that was full of praise for Best as a 'Caribbean thinker'. The source is important, because apart from being Jamaica's oldest and arguably its most influential newspaper, the *Gleaner* in the 1960s had a reputation for being hostile to everything that Lloyd Best stood for. Now the newspaper recognises him as "one of the finest academics to emerge from the Caribbean". It noted that globalisation is 'adding new and renewed relevance' to his thinking and to the concept of plantation economy that he and others postulated. It concludes by saying that "Lloyd Best was best at being, literally, a Caribbean man".

On Sunday March 25 the *Gleaner* also published a tribute to Best by Professor Rex Nettleford. Nettleford is himself the most iconic of Jamaican intellectuals—Vice Chancellor Emeritus of the U.W.I., founder and leader of the Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company, author of numerous books on the cultural predicaments of the Caribbean, and recipient of the super-prestigious Jamaican Order of Merit.

Nettleford's article hailed Lloyd Best as "one of the region's finest minds to embrace the discourse towards better understanding of self and society...(he) flourished and endured as forth-teller, priest and monarch...in the role of socio-economic 'adviser' to governments, including the governments of the Caribbean Community".

Nettleford observed with satisfaction that Best, although an economist, understood the limitations of economics and drew on "a number of social science disciplines" in "his relentless search for truth as far as knowledge goes and for what he has felt would be

sane, sensible and salutary for the development of his Caribbean”. He declared that “history has already absolved him”, and referred approvingly to Lloyd’s insistence that a radical overhaul of the Caribbean education system is needed to cope with globalisation.

The third item was about the ‘LNG Issue’ – the situation that emerged when the Government of Trinidad and Tobago announced that it was unable to fulfill its commitment under a Memorandum of Understanding to supply certain quantities of Liquefied Natural Gas to Jamaica. The article in question was authored by Al Edwards and appeared in the *Business Observer* of Jamaica on March 30, 2007. It was factual, analytical, well-reasoned and balanced in approach and tone.

In brief, the article showed that Venezuela has more reserves of natural gas than it can process in the foreseeable future, that T&T has less reserves than its potential processing capacity, and that Jamaica’s needs for natural gas are greater than T&T’s production capacity or Venezuela’s processing capacity. The conclusion was that the potential exists for a win-win arrangement among all three countries.

The fourth item to which I want to refer is a column that appeared in Jamaica’s *Sunday Gleaner* of March 25, 2007. The author used the LNG issue as a pretext to launch what has aptly been described by a local columnist as a ‘racist diatribe’ directed against T&T and its people. I would prefer not to name the columnist or the article since I believe that to do so would be to give both an importance which neither deserves. Suffice it to say that the factual inaccuracies in the article was exceeded only by its incredibly bad taste.

It is a curious fact that, of the four items mentioned above, it was the last that received the most press coverage here in Trinidad and Tobago. It has also been widely been circulated on the Internet. The other three were hardly noticed, if at all.

I am moved to reflect on what lesson is to be drawn from this for relations within our Caricom family. Is it that a discourse of demeaning one another is more newsworthy than one of pride in collective accomplishment? Is it that intemperate and confrontational rhetoric amongst us makes better copy than reasoned discussion? I am reminded of the hyperbolic headlines that accompanied the Barbados—T&T fishing dispute in the press of both countries.

One problem with exchanges of this kind is that they have a nasty habit of getting out of hand. Things are said and done that cannot be unsaid and undone.

Clearly the rhetoric should be cooled, and both sides need to take the time to consider the other’s point of view, set the matter in the wider context.

By the way, I hope that before the people of T&T reach hasty conclusions about what Jamaicans think of them--and succumb to the natural urge to reply in kind—they read the unstinting tributes from leading Jamaicans to one of this country’s greatest sons.

And mabe the whole region should take to heart Mr. Edwards's obseration that 'brewing mistrust, ill will, resentment and suspicion cannot be allowed to unravel the CSME'.