

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTERS OF CARICOM

Dear Prime Ministers

Re: URGENT MISSIVE ON THE IMMIGRATION CRISIS IN BARBADOS

I write to you in my capacity as a founding member and secretary of the newly formed Barbadian lobby group- 'The Coalition For A Humane Amnesty'.

Our organisation is a broad based grouping of citizens and residents of Barbados , and comprises natives of several Caribbean countries, inclusive of St. Vincent, Guyana, St. Lucia, Dominica, and of course, Barbados.

The primary purpose of our 'Coalition' is to campaign against a new Immigration policy in relation to citizens of CARICOM countries that was recently enunciated by the Government of Barbados.

We fear that if this new policy is implemented it will wreak severe hardship and dislocation on many citizens of CARICOM states who have been settled in Barbados for periods of time ranging from 5 years to 11 years.

However in order to appreciate the negative implications of the new policy, it is important to have an understanding of the old policy that it is replacing.

In or about the year 1995, the then Barbados Labour Party government created a special Amnesty policy for our CARICOM brothers and sisters who were residing and working in Barbados without legal authorisation- so-called 'undocumented CARICOM migrants'.

This policy was to the effect that undocumented CARICOM migrants who had continuously resided in Barbados for a period of at least 5 years, and who had not run afoul of the criminal law, were invited to come in to the Immigration authorities and to make an application for Immigrant Status.

Once the migrant went into the Immigration Department and lodged his or her application for Immigrant status, the Immigration authorities stamped an extension of stay in the migrant's passport, or, in cases where the migrant might previously have had a work permit, issued a new work permit, so that the migrant would have a legal status in Barbados while awaiting determination of his or her application for Immigrant status.

And once the migrant was able to establish that he or she had settled into Barbadian society and was making a positive contribution to the country, they were virtually guaranteed that their application for Immigrant status would be accepted. Indeed even if they did not receive an immediate grant of Immigrant status, they would receive a 3 year grant of "permission to reside and work", which would later be converted into a grant of Immigrant status.

Furthermore, in the unlikely event of their application being rejected by the Immigration authorities, they had a right of appeal to an Immigration Review Committee that was chaired by a Minister of Government.

The thinking behind this policy was that we owed a special consideration to our fellow CARICOM citizens, and further, that if a person had put down roots in the society and was making a positive contribution, no useful purpose was served by deporting and dislocating that person and their dependants.

Now, the fundamental change that the new policy is making is that it is increasing the qualifying period for the Amnesty from 5 years to almost 12 years!

In enunciating the new policy in Parliament on 5th May 2009, Prime Minister Thompson announced that the Government was inviting undocumented CARICOM migrants who had come to Barbados prior to 1st January 1998, to come into the Immigration Department in order to lodge an application for Immigrant status and to have their status regularized. He also divulged that he was giving them a 6 month period (1st June to 1st December 2009) to do so, and warned that after 1st December 2009, all CARICOM migrants who were in Barbados without legal status would be "removed".

Now, Mr. Thompson will be hard pressed to find any CARICOM migrants who are in Barbados for over 11 years, and who have not already gone into the Immigration Department seeking to avail themselves of the 5 year amnesty. However, he will find many migrants who have been in Barbados for periods of time ranging from 5 years to 11 years, and who will now be subject to deportation under this new policy!

Many of these 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 year migrants will be people who are employed in secure jobs; people with Barbados born children and native Barbadian common law spouses; and the heads of families and households in Barbados. Furthermore, many of them will be persons who had a legitimate expectation that they had qualified for the 5 year amnesty, and in some cases, will already have lodged applications with the Immigration Department.

Our organisation believes that the new policy is retrogressive and potentially inhumane, and we will be campaigning to persuade our government to abandon it and revert to the old 5 year amnesty policy.

We suspect that part of the motivation for the new policy is a fear on the part of the Barbados government that the current global economic crisis will cause a weakening of the economic position in Barbados and a rise in unemployment, and so they have resolved to respond by turning inwards, and adopting a strict Barbados for Barbadians policy. They also seem to be sending a message that CARICOM migrants will not be welcome in Barbados, and so, persons seeking a refuge from the economic crisis in their home countries should not turn their eyes to Barbados.

We are of the view that this is a counter productive response to the crisis, and will, in all likelihood, ultimately result in destruction of jobs, rather than preservation of jobs for native Barbadians.

Against the foregoing background, we would now like to put the following two proposals to you for your consideration:-

(1.) Not only do we wish to persuade the Barbados government to revert to the 5 year amnesty period, but we would also like to propose that all CARICOM member states adopt a 5 year amnesty period in relation to citizens of fellow CARICOM states, as a 'minimalist' Immigration policy. (We use the word 'minimalist' to suggest that some countries might wish to adopt a more favourable policy, such as a 3 or 4 year amnesty, but certainly nothing less favourable than 5 years). We submit that an across-the-board CARICOM policy would be in the best interests of all parties!

(2.) In order to avoid the spectacle of many or all CARICOM states responding to the economic crisis by turning inwards and scapegoating citizens of fellow CARICOM countries, we would like to propose the holding of a special regional meeting to address this specific danger. Such a meeting should conclude with a collective resolve and plan of action not to permit our responses to the crisis to destroy our regional integration movement. We strongly feel that there is now a need for us to come together and determine upon a course of collective action designed to protect the livelihoods of all the people of the CARICOM sub-region.

We now ask you to discuss these matters with your fellow CARICOM heads of government, including Prime Minister David Thompson

.

Yours faithfully

DAVID A. COMMISSIONG
Secretary