

Things the People should know in Defense of the Vote and Calypso.

By: Alex Bruno, © 2019.

Context

This article was first published at the end of the first week of the Lenten season, observed by Roman Catholics in the year two thousand and nineteen. It is meant for a Dominican audience in lieu of heightened partisan polarization and bickering coming out of the Carnival-Calypso season, a period which saw unprecedented partisan rhetoric very much common to such climate. The struggle to gain votes and to redefine Calypso away from its oversight responsibility and place it in a sort of bias partisan point of view gave rise to this response. This is an election year in Dominica and I argue that both the vote and Calypso have been paraded as scapegoats of a status quo which is unrelenting in its opposition to the people's conscious demands for a new social order.

Discussion

There are a few people who cared enough to teach me what they thought I should have known at an earlier stage of my life and I do the same today for those who are now at the stage that I was. It is also my hope that those who helped in nurturing me and have seemingly lost their way will receive the same "good message" of civic responsibility and nationhood which they once cared about so passionately.

Back then, I was not always willing to listen, but I heard and I certainly remember. I may not have heeded what I heard at certain times, but in time certain things made a lot more sense to me. Younger Dominicans, this is your time to hear and probably to listen, because the days remaining for Dominica to catch the wave of pragmatic success seem to be running short.

Let me begin my reflections by stating what I believe is the present political status of Dominica. The government of Dominica appears to be a quasi authoritarian led democracy. By this I mean we have a form of governance which appears to have strong centralized power, which is focused on one individual, Prime Minister Skerrit. There are obvious shortfalls in constitutional accountability and an overreaching encroachment on individuals' political freedom in addition to disproportionate treatment re the rule of law. This is my view of things based on several observable instances.

This situation was arrived at following almost two decades of one party or regime having authority over the Dominican electoral system. Now, this is not unique to Dominica and one only has to look at other examples of authoritative democracies - past and present - for affirmation. The initiatives of the Dominican Government fall squarely in the domains of centralized authoritative rule. This is my professional assessment which was arrived at, as has been stated, following several very well ventilated instances of authoritative tendencies, and there is no need to rehash those. Let me instead invest this discussion on the future and the youths which is where I believe attention needs to be placed.

I focus on two key areas: *Voting* and *Calypso*. Again, I decided to concentrate on those key points because of the perceived misrepresentation of the agency of the voter and the mischaracterization of the treasured foundational art of Calypso. The lead premise of this article is: *votes should not and cannot be purchased, sold, bought, and Calypso is not, cannot and should not be politically partisan, nor must it be socially proper. Calypso certainly is not fearful of authority.*

Let us first discuss voting or the voter – the vote. The voter wields the power while the elected representative rules according to the wishes of the voter(s). This is however more effective in purer democracies, and as have been suggested earlier, Dominica does not now exemplify a pure(r) democracy. There is therefore very urgent need for a sober reflection and deep introspection of the responsibility of the voter, especially the Dominican voter.

If the voter gives up the power of their vote in exchange of any material commodity, their vote becomes commodified. When the vote becomes a commodity, peoples' power is compromised. When the people's power is compromised, authoritative tendencies reign supreme. When authoritative acumen prospers, many people suffer and those who generally suffer are the one who had mortgaged their votes in the first instance. Because, just think about it: the wealthy (more astute) person does not need to be induced to vote; they are the agents of inducement. The lower or induced class are always the ones who suffer the most, so the suggestion here is that voters who are targeted for vote buying/selling (by any means, be it transportation, appliances, cash, gifts, vehicles, houses '*homes*,' gadgets and all the other payoffs), must know that their power and independence ends when they give in. But it does not have to be so.

What I learnt from the folks who nurtured me is that I must earn what I need, and work towards what I want. It is simply not a good idea to give one's inalienable asset, the vote, away in exchange for material gains. When we vote, we should do so for the sustenance of humanity as well as for the continued existence of non-human animals and the other natural amenities which help procure our humanity. When we vote, we should vote for growth and prosperity and for the

enhancement of future generations. I cannot see how getting paid for a vote ensures a better future.

If your vote is honorable, and it should be, it should not be bought. I end by stating that fiscal incentives and vote buying are different things. Incentives are that which is given to citizens who are less well off – and that I support. Vote buying is willful manipulation of a system for selfish partisan political gains. It works only for a time, but the nation suffers in the long run, hence the need for my apprehension. Younger Dominicans, you should know this and do all you can to avoid the corrupting of the system because this is the same corrupt system which you will inherit. What is probably most telling is that, it is harder to cleanse an electoral system from corruption than to corrupt.

What has happened to many citizens in several corrupt systems can happen to Dominicans. Just look around and see how many people are fleeing from Haiti, Venezuela and Mexico to other shores, just to mention a few. Now, I am by no means suggesting that the situation in the aforementioned countries arose because of vote buying. I simply state that those countries' systems have become corrupt, and that Dominica's system can (and some say has) become corrupt if we do not take urgent stock. This is certainly not the sort of future that any fair-thinking citizen would want for their country, irrespective of how partisan they might be. I am very confident – based on my field studies over the years – that this 'vote buying matter' is commonplace within the Dominican electoral system.

I now move to Calypso. Calypso can be defined as a conscious realization which is manifested in the form of musical expressions (or song) that is unleashed on the oppressive world by Africans, through the struggles of its Caribbean descendants. Calypso is unconquerable and eternal. It cannot be suppressed, lost or stolen. It cannot be reconditioned or reformed because it is a natural and absolute aspect of a people's Africaness. Calypso is a highly sophisticated form of intellectual expression in song, which was developed by Africans to communicate the ills of the capture and the system of forced labour or 'enslavement' of Africans. I believe that this adequately responds to the critics of the form, but to be totally clear, allow me to add that Calypso comes from the nucleus of a people's identity, and it took slavery to bring it to life in the way that it has evolved.

For those who believe that the art can be diminished or sidelined, please note that Calypso was strengthened by the hundreds of years since that brutal era of Slavery, and it will continue to strengthen every time there is injustice or oppression. Calypso was not conditioned by the societal order; it made a short cut through the onward leg of the Triangular Passage and landed in the Caribbean as its own unique entity. Calypso has remained intact, strong it has not been defiled, and it now serves as a 'socially acceptable' dagger in the side of the oppressor or evil doer. No one is immune to Calypso, not even the Calypsonian. In the true spirit of openness and transparency, this view of Calypso comes from my unpublished book: *Historical Perspectives of Calypso & Soca Music in Dominican Culture*. This book will now be released in 2020.

I have read comments geared at undoing of Calypso which is simply laughable. To seek to undo Calypso is to seek to undo you. Calypso was built on the people's struggle, and as long as there

are systems of authority in place, there will be struggle and it is Calypso which provides a medium for the ventilation of such struggles in Caribbean societies. Calypso is inherently Caribbean and it is generally domestic. Of course, the same may be exported but any exported form of Calypso has to be diluted to suite such export ambitions. With that stated, Calypso can also be universal, but such universality has its place and time and particular genius.

The Mighty Sparrow, the creators' gift to Calypso, is probably the lone connoisseur of the art that imbue the sort of permeable quality of universality in the Kaiso. The lesser mortals can only try, but as Norman Cyrille 'The NC' states: why sing on an issue when those concerned can't hear me at all? I would like to add, even if they hear you now, they may not be concerned because your issues might not be on their list of priorities. So, Calypso should sing for the downtrodden and it should be taken to them – not to a world and region which do not seem to or has no particular reason to care. I hope this deals with the criticisms levied against the authorities of Dominica Calypso? The Dominica Calypso Association (DCA) has done its fair share to promote, package and market Calypso (although more can be done); it is left to you to respond to the Kaiso consciousness.

There are times in life when certain things should matter more than money. The preservation of a peoples' way of life, their creativity, the performing art and other foundational practices – like Calypso – must be preserved and protected and I call on all peoples of sober consciences to arise to the call. Cadence, Soca, Zouk, Bouyon, Groovy Soca, Power Soca and the Bouyon-Soca crossover as was captured by Dada Lawrence with his work on '*Famalay*,' the Road march song emerging from Trinidad Tobago 2019 Carnival, all

came from the nucleus of Calypso. If we now eliminate Calypso, we will be damaging the cornerstone of our peoples' struggle. Is that what we want?

On a final note, Calypso – the art – and judging of 'the art' are two totally different distinct endeavors. Calypso is that which has been explained previously and judging of the Calypso is what it is: making opinion based on a set criteria which governs the performance of Calypso.

I am never one to judge the judges because one cannot really judge the judge unless there are set criteria with which to apply judgement. One certainly cannot use the criteria that judges use to judge a particular Calypso to judge the judges of the Calypso, and Calypso itself does not even know that it is being judged. The form simply avails itself to the performer and it is the system which fights over whatever it fights over. Judging is a subjective art as the best Calypso is the one which invokes the people's consciousness and gains their vote of confidence.

Conclusion

It is evident that 'the vote' and 'the Calypso' belong to the same struggle and should therefore be preserved in the same manner. Vote buying and Calypso bashing only seek to compromise the gains which 'we the people' have made. My dear Dominican people, I know we are better than that and we should do better. This is not and should not be about a party or a man or a group. Our strength is vested in our family, the cohesive community, our strong and healthy nation, the empowered region and a

better world. If you doubt this, well you could ignore my call; if you believe this, let us wise up and address what needs to be addressed.

It is amazing how some people have crumbled under the weight of thirty pieces of silver; it is sad to see that some, who messaged for a stronger, better, a united and more progressive Dominica in times past, now linger by the wayside and seemingly applaud the architects of her demise.

Young people, please be counted among those who dare to do better. I love you...I love Dominica and always will.