

Cole Janet: Just for your reading - if you get time. It's
for this weekend.

Earl

XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM GONE MAD!

-- Let's take Bob Marley's advice and
emancipate ourselves from mental slavery

by Earl Bousquet

I have no problem with ordinary Guyanese asking me where I was born or reminding me that I am not a Guyanese; that I am "an islander" who "came here" or was "brought here." I have no problem with any of these assertions because, apart from anything else, they constitute the truth. Indeed, I am a 238-square-mile islander living and working in an 83,000-square-mile country. I've been hearing this ever since I started working here in the second quarter of 1993. And every now and then I'm reminded on my nightly radio programmes from whence I came.

Whenever callers who don't agree with the views I express on "Action Line", "Plain Talk" or "Issues In The News" resort to reminding me of my nationality, I regard their resort to xenophobic expressions as something which is simply West Indian in character.

St. Lucians too, like to remind "foreigners" from other Caribbean islands from whence they came. There, where I come from, the population is over 98% black, so the few "white people" stand out, as do the small numbers of East Indian descent. But there's no race problem. And everyone is St. Lucian.

Xenophobic statements are made now and then, particularly in cases where the person or persons who is or are the object of the criticism have done something out of the way to hurt national pride. Or, in cases where politicians have no other leg to stand on in pursuit of power, they simply play on nationalistic sentiments and whip up a temporary xenophobic rage with the hope it will win votes.

The man who led St. Lucia for the longest -- John Compton -- who served as Chief Minister from 1964 to 1967, as Premier from 1967 to 1979 and as Prime Minister from 1982 to 1996, was not born in St. Lucia. His birthplace was on Canouan, one of the Grenadine chain of islands associated with neighbouring St. Vincent. He is still the longest surviving Member of Parliament on the island. And he has won his seat in every election since Adult Suffrage; never mind the opposition reminding him at each election that he was "not a born St. Lucian."

The man who is Governor General of St. Lucia today -- George Mallet -- was the second longest-serving Member of Parliament (after Compton) before he gave up his parliamentary seat last year as part of a political arrangement to facilitate the entry of Dr Vaughan Lewis as the successor to Mr Compton both in the prime Ministership and as Leader of the ruling United Workers Party (UWP). But Mr Mallet too, was not born in St. Lucia. He was born in Panama and migrated to St. Lucia as a young man. And he won every election despite the opposition reminding him he was "not a born St. Lucian."

Maurice Bishop wasn't born in Grenada. His parents gave birth to him on the Dutch island of Aruba. Paul Southwell, the late Premier of St. Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla, was born in Dominica.

Alexander Hamilton, a great figure in the history of the United States, was born in Bermuda.

Then there are the number of Caribbean people who hold parliamentary positions in various other countries. Sir Learie Constantine, the great Trinidadian cricket legend, is a member of the House of Lords in Britain. Guyanese-born Ovid Jackson is today the Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Transport in Canada. Bernie Grant, another Guyanese-born, is a long-standing Member of Parliament in Britain. My cousin Ben Bousquet has also been a British Labour Party Councillor for the Royal Borough of Kensington in London (the area within which Buckingham Palace is located).

And the list could go on and on.

I make these points to come to the matter of the big fuss being made here by supposedly intelligent people about Janet Jagan being unsuitable to be Prime Minister of Guyana.

I listen to some pontificate with hifalutin phrases like her not having the "umbilical legitimacy" to be Prime Minister or to lead Guyana; and I listen to others talk about her "age" and her "past" to make a similar case (as if they have never heard about a man named Juan Bosch, who was elected and re-elected President of the Dominican Republic, despite the fact that he was over eighty years old -- and blind.

I listen to these silly arguments and I say the Gods must be mad. And I laugh.

But this is no laughing matter, because, as I said earlier, I can understand those who don't know better. But those who know better but who would want to hide behind phrases and concocted philosophical arguments to argue against Mrs Jagan becoming Prime Minister (or even President) because she was born in the USA, because she's white, because she's 75 years old or just because they don't like her simply make me sick.

Unlike the grassroots Guyanese who call "Plain Talk" from time to time to tell me to "go back to St. Lucia," those supposedly intelligent people who write press releases for the People's National Congress (PNC) and pen their names to letters to the daily newspapers know very well of the hundreds of thousands of Guyanese who are serving in top positions all over the world. Most of them have themselves lived and worked in other countries.

PNC Leader, Mr Desmond Hoyte, was a teacher in Grenada (and Maurice Bishop may very well have been one of his students at the Grenada Boys secondary School (GBSS) before his return here in 1968. But even while he was out there doing yeoman service in another man's country, an American-born woman by the name of Janet Jagan had been living and struggling alongside her Guyanese husband for some 25 consecutive years, being jailed and brutalised in the process while raising a family, fighting for the right of Guyanese men and women to vote, for an end to colonialism and for independence for this very country in which she was not born.

Mrs Jagan had been part of Guyana's struggles for some 59 years before the PNC's young and ebullient, loquacious current General Secretary Aubrey Norton was born.

In fact, Mrs Jagan first landed in Guyana on the very same day that President Sam Hinds was born in Alexander Village, Georgetown, in December 1943.

Much has been said and written about her other credentials: her long years of unbroken parliamentary service, her service in previous Cabinet and ministerial posts, her consistent fight for progress for women, etc.

It's not that those supposedly enlightened critics of Guyana's first woman Prime Minister don't know these things. They do. But they would rather spit in the face of history and reality and cough-up the nasty phlegm the results from a concoction of racism and xenophobia in pursuit of political gains.

These people would probably have cursed Dr Jagan for having made St. Lucian-born Arthur Lewis the first Caribbean-born Chancellor of the University of Guyana. Or they would have cursed Guyanese-born James Rodway for teaching Derek Walcott to read, write and understand the English language properly. But they too would also have shared in the Caribbean's pride when it came to pass that Lewis and Walcott were (and still are) the only two persons from the English-speaking Caribbean to have been awarded Nobel prizes for their worldly achievements in economics and literature, respectively.

But then, these same people would also probably want to offer the argument that while Lewis and Walcott are Caribbean people (or West Indians) Mrs Jagan "was born in America."

To which I would say: "Bullshit!" Because, while she was born in North America, they were born in South America. And therefore, her accusers are in fact as "American" as she is.

The spurious argument over where Mrs Jagan was born is as ridiculous as the laws in Caricom member-states which would have an Immigration Officer in St. Lucia dictate that my then eight-month-old Guyanese-born baby could only have entered the island last Christmas on the basis of an undertaking that he "will not engage in gainful employment" -- and for a limited time only.

This argument over birthplace is nothing but an extension of the colonial education and upbringing which was foisted on us in these parts when Europe carved up Africa and the rest of the world and divided the "discovered" peoples into separate entities and settlements that were given names and which eventually emerged as separate nationalities. It's just another manifestation of a colonial mentality.

Patriotic nationalism has its place in this world. But when nationalism becomes petty and chauvinistic and is used to argue against the fact that we all live in one world to which we all have equal claim, those who propagate such views are in fact underestimating -- or simply don't understand -- the universality of mankind.

The United Nations is 51 years young and the concept of this being One World with One People with One Voice is as applicable and real as Guyana is One Nation with One People and One Destiny. It is therefore time to encourage that new thinking that will encourage Guyanese and Caribbean people to understand that we belong, not only to ourselves, but to an Earth that is part of a Universe which we share with others -- both human and otherwise.

In this day and age when we are approaching the Third Millennium, it is therefore imperative that those who offer themselves as tomorrow's leaders take heed of Bob Marley's call to

"emancipate yourself from mental slavery" because "none but ourselves could free our minds."