

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

A political role for the Caribbean's Diaspora

Consider this: In 2001, one in 10 voters in the United Kingdom were members of an ethnic minority; by 2050 the number will have risen to one in five. Put another way, demographic change is set to permanently change the nature of political power in Britain, as it is already doing in the United States.

Although the implications of this are scarcely understood in the Caribbean, analysis of the detail behind these figures suggests, potentially that this could have profound implications for the region. If it were to find ways to implement its much vaunted desire to mobilise the Caribbean's overseas community, it now has the opportunity to better address issues such as the UK's discriminatory Air Passenger Duty, where the regions and the Diaspora's interests coincide.

The potential of changing demographics to permanently alter the balance of political power is already evident in the US where the Republican candidate for the White House, Mitt Romney, lost because his party had little appeal to burgeoning numbers of voters from minority communities. Now, thoughtful Republicans, concerned about their future of their party, are beginning to recognise that they may never win a presidential race again if they do not develop policies that appeal to Hispanic voters, Asian-Americans and those under forty.

As in the US, so in the UK; the demographic make-up of the country and its electorate is changing rapidly.

Until recently the implications of this had not been widely understood, but over the last year a plethora of reports have indicated the political importance of minorities.

What has dramatically increased awareness have been recent comments to political colleagues in the Conservative Party by David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, that the outcome of Britain's next General election (due by May 2015) could well depend on the voting intentions of minorities in marginal constituencies.

In 2010 the Conservatives managed to obtain only 16 per cent of the minority community vote compared to the opposition Labour Party's 68 per cent. The likelihood is that the Conservative's share will fall even lower in the next election. The party has therefore recognised that unless it can bridge this gap, between 10 and 15 of its parliamentary seats are at risk as are their hopes of capturing 10 to 15 other marginals held by Labour. They also face a new threat. Upwardly mobile black and Asian voters are moving away from Labour's urban heartlands to the marginal suburban seats that the Conservative Party needs to win to remain in power.

One consequence, of what may over time become an existential challenge, is that Conservative MPs and candidates are being given advice on how to engage minority communities in a strategy that builds reportedly on the experience of the Conservative Party of Canada.

The UK's Labour Party, which has to a significant extent taken the votes of the Caribbean and Asian communities for granted, is also gearing up to improve their outreach, is starting to identify the issues that matter to the UK's Caribbean community, and is considering how best to restore once close links with the Caribbean and its political support groups resident in the UK.

For the Caribbean, demographic change in North America and in Europe offers an opportunity to modify political positions, if in a well considered the region encourages its community overseas to engage actively with all political parties and legislators.

This is already an approach taken in Washington by countries like the Dominican Republic and the nations of Latin America, but has so far been conspicuously absent when it come to the countries of Caricom in both North America and Europe.

This is particularly shocking in the United Kingdom where a high proportion of the population have links to the region and where so many issues of importance are left to occasional visits by Ministers.

Surprisingly it is still the case that a significant number of Caribbean governments still think they should not be seen to be encouraging their community overseas to actively lobby. They regard this, in some old fashioned way, as being seen to interfere in the domestic affairs of another country, irrespective of the fact that it is widely accepted that most nations actively encourage their communities to act in this way.

In suggesting this, the Caribbean has not recognised that this is now, not only the way of the world, but could for a region that has fallen off most nations political map, bolster the position of friends in Government and politics in Europe and North America, who despair about how hard it is to achieve progress on Caribbean issues.

In the UK the situation is almost derisory. Not only are there some 0.5m to 1m people who can claim some sort of familial tie to the Caribbean, but there are many more hundreds of thousands of visitors and businesses who feel positively about the region, and are only too willing to be supportive if asked.

Developing a strategy is hardly rocket science.

Firstly, the Anglophone part of the region needs to better understand that appealing to intellect and morality has little utility fifty years or so after independence. Old relationships have changed, new generations are in power and it is lobbying, voting intentions, photo opportunities, constituency visits, social media, celebrity, and leverage that are the ways in which one engineers sympathy and change

Secondly, to develop a voice through the Diaspora requires the mobilisation of financial resources. Governments may talk in high terms about the role of the community overseas, but the reality is they have not been willing to fund and sustain networks either directly or with the private sector.

Thirdly, the Anglophone Caribbean community remains hopelessly divided by country of allegiance, and with the exception of Jamaica, which has a high cultural profile across all ages and affinities, has not yet worked out how to realise the progress that would come from a concerted community-wide approach.

And fourthly, there is a pressing need to recognise the role of new networks such as the black churches, the new elites of achievers from the community in ever more senior positions who want to be asked to help, and the unions and other associations that group large numbers of workers of Caribbean origin.

The changing nature of British and North American demographics and the effect it is having on politics offers the region a new opportunity. It requires a well-considered response.

David Jessop is the Director of the Caribbean Council and can be contacted at david.jessop@caribbean-council.org

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