

Of silences, elites and looking forward

Sometimes it is easier to hold on to the past than to address the present; for elites to interact only with each other, to repeat the same actions, and to lose touch with those whom they seek to help.

Recently, the Financial Times journalist and author, Gillian Tett, one of the few who in 2006 accurately forecast the financial crisis and its origins, delivered a thought-provoking short lecture for BBC radio*. She noted that as a social anthropologist she had discovered that her discipline had provided her with the tools to analyse issues in ways not normally considered by writers on finance.

Listening to her short lecture, the applicability of her theme to the silences now prevalent in the Caribbean, rapidly become apparent.

In brief, she argued that her academic skills had provided her with an alternative framework to analyse markets, to navigate their contradictions and tensions, and to see how what was said within elites differed from what was happening on the ground. Her approach was based on the thinking of the French philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu, his focus on cognitive maps, how we arrange the world, imagine and talk about it, and how this relates to power. It enabled her, she said, to see the gaps between rhetoric and reality.

Ms Tett said that what she had observed in banking before 2007 was that when ideas about derivatives and other hard to understand financial instruments did not fit any traditional system of financial classification, bankers entered into a complicity of silence. This was because what was ignored and not talked about enabled them to maintain the status quo. It meant that elites could continue to follow well worn rituals using existing language and structures.

Among bankers before the crash there was, she discovered, a desire to establish such rituals to reinforce their position, believing that it was normal to speak abstractedly about finance without reference to human beings. They assumed, she said, that their actions were a good thing and something that only bankers understood. They did not expect to be scrutinised and so became detached from real life and its human impact.

In short they developed tunnel vision, developing a kind of tribalism that involved maintaining their elite positions by creating social silences.

Her remarks well describe what now seems to be happening across the Caribbean (and in many others parts of the world) where closed political elites repeat language and ideas in a manner that guarantees that, short of a cataclysmic economic crisis in the region, little new will occur.

It suggests a reason why, beyond the slow burn effect of the global economic downturn, the Caribbean region has gone from one that was developing, diversifying and establishing an identity, to one for which the political class offers little in the way of a positive narrative to address decline, division, indebtedness, or increasing crime.

If applied to the Caribbean, Ms Tett's approach provides a different and alternative analytical framework in which to consider the Caribbean's failing leadership and why elites in CARICOM in

particular, to paraphrase Ms Tett, are becoming detached from real life, seemingly unable or unwilling to understand that the gap they have created between rhetoric and delivery, or how – my words – they are in danger of creating a hard to resolve multi-layered long-term crisis.

Most politicians in the region (and around the world) have lost the capacity to speak honestly and directly about the future and what has to be done if what confronts them is likely to result in decline in their power or influence. More often than not, they seek only to disturb the status quo for so long as it brings advantage.

This may be why in the Caribbean the concept of national interest scarcely exists.

The idea that the nation, the economy or social well-being is to benefit citizens rather than enable the maintenance or achievement of power seems increasingly alien and in the longer run has as its consequence a diminished national inheritance.

IMF programmes are a good example of this where, in one Caribbean country at least, the leaders of both political parties are not wholly convinced, despite a consensus amongst others in their leadership, that what is on the table ought to be fully implemented if there is ever to be an escape from indebtedness, low growth and the constant under achievement of the nation's potential.

There are many other examples. The Caribbean has begun a debate on reparations. This emotional touchstone may have cultural depth and regional resonance but what are its practical consequences? Private sector led development is held out as a desired objective, but the number of significant companies interested in moving into new areas of investment or trade is limited. Trade agreements are negotiated, then rejected, ignored or not utilised. Tourism has become an industry to be taxed until those who utilise its services vote by ceasing to arrive. Cuba is welcome as a partner to CARICOM but the Dominican Republic may not be. Human rights abuses within the region are hardly ever spoken about. The concept of CARICOM based on shared aspirations may be close to an end, but who will say so? Some regional airlines operate as if the passengers are an annoyance.

As negative as all this sounds its purpose is to suggest that what is desperately needed is an authentic Caribbean voice or voices that can suggest how the region might find a new and convincing narrative about its future, re-interpret its shared memory of history and move on.

Caribbean reality is that of a disparate group mainly consisting of islands growing at different economic speeds separated not just by sea but by a growing range of issues from big to small disputes, and a view that seems to suggest that governments are not doing much more than trying to survive.

Despite this, there are many in the region longing for change. Many younger well educated people want to participate, see their region prosper and move on, bringing to the region what is best from outside, rather than having to go down the route, also largely unspoken, of having to move away to find opportunity elsewhere.

One of the attributes of some of the world's greatest leaders has been the courage to speak out, be revolutionary and disrupt elites, changing the thinking of their own and other parties, instituting creative conflict within government, in business and in mass movements.

Has the region any longer any such person?

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Previous columns can be found at www.caribbean-council.org

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****What Gillian Tett had to say can be heard at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b036tz9w> but may not be available in some Caribbean countries.***