

Agglutination & the National Mind

The Case of Dominica

By

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The Oxford Dictionary defines “agglutinate” as a verb to mean: *firmly stick* or be stuck together to form a mass; adjective-agglutinated; noun – agglutination. Origins-mid 16th century: from Latin *agglutinare*- 'caused to adhere', from the verb *agglutinare*, from *ad-* 'to' + *glutinare* (from *gluten* 'glue'). And it is that sticking together in a community of interests, coupled with clearly identifiable national traits, which evolves a nation. As a nation recognized with clearly identifiable borders, a national government, and body of law, Dominica is a recent entrant into the family of nations; we came into being as a nation-state on November 3, 1978 to be exact. However, it would be erroneous to date our formation as a community from that time.

Indeed, our roots go far back into antiquity and the hunter-gatherer Kalinago people who resided on our island in the pre-Colombian period. As the Kalinago were a people without a body of written work or philosophy recorded on stone- or in great monuments - we know little of our Kalinago antecedents. Recent efforts to rescue that history from oblivion- though commendable- is more inclined toward the touristic aspects of that culture; aimed primarily at those who can pay to visit, as opposed to encouraging any indigenous introspection and elevation of higher purpose. Our links with French culture are more recent and derive from the French colonial occupation, its remnants in names, written history and our current links born of our geographic proximity to French ruled Guadeloupe and Martinique. More dominant however are those facets of our national culture derived from British rule; our language, our laws, our systems of governance, even our medicine and agriculture owe much to this. Our glue – or agglutination - therefore resides in those aspects of the British value systems we have come to know today: the rule of law, a parliamentary system of debate, free press, freedom of association, freedom of religion, and the right of workers to organize themselves in trade unions, social democratic ideals and due process of law. For about five hundred years those value systems made Britain, a relatively small island off the coast of Europe, a global

powerhouse which built an empire upon which the sun never set. Even today, in commercial aviation and computer sciences, that Anglo imprint can be seen. Those value systems we cherish today triumphed, not simply due to the superiority of British arms, but thrived due to superior conduct in operational art.

As an independent nation, we seek to build institutions. However, we do well where we do not throw the baby out with the bath water and retain those values where they impart a sense of discipline, good order and purpose to our lives. I posit that it was not brute force alone which made the British colonial enterprise more superior in execution than its French or Spanish competitors. Rather, it would seem that Britain was possessed of a “national mind” which valued meritocracy and a constant yearning for freedom. That system, where it thrived, also showed a preference for accountability and transparency, and disdain for governance rooted in kleptocracy and nepotism.

As I have written in “Whither August Monday- A Reflection on our British Heritage Pan Africanism and Development” at http://da-academy.org/august_monday.pdf, the character of the British nation was anchored in the Magna Carta from which sprang forth the noble principles of the right of the governed to hold government accountable in all things, securing individual liberties against tyrannical government, habeas corpus, and the right to a fair trial before an impartial tribunal. The Magna Carta and all the values which flowed from it – allowed those who were touched by that system to possess a stronger sense of individual freedom. Indeed, the wellspring born of rule of law principles is the very antidote to tyranny and tyrants. But how did the British craft those values unto the colonized?

Over Christmas 2011 an electrical engineer from Trinidad lamented the divorce between the governed and the government in our islands and the rise in criminal conduct by government and the governed. He said to me, “Christian, our people do not believe in any sense of duty to country over selfish gain, anymore. It’s every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost. What has happened to our law abiding nature and sense of duty to country?” How right he was in that lamentation. Concerns are rising as never before from the Bahamas in the north to Guyana on the South American continent: what has gone wrong with our value system? Why are some in government enriching themselves at the expense of the nation? Why are so many of our young people running amok in criminal conduct? Our patriarch, Wendell McKenzie Christian – a World War II British

Army veteran – never tired of telling us about Lord Nelson’s inspirational call to his sailors aboard the *HMS Victory* on the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar. He said: *Tomorrow England expects every man to do his duty!*” That tradition of duty to nation colored the British national mind with stoicism, and sacrifice for the greater good. That ethic served Britain well. In 1940 it came to the fore again in the towering defiance of Prime Minister Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill’s call to “Never, ever, surrender!” His call for national resistance against the Nazi onslaught, which had swept the Low Countries and defeated France, found resonance amongst a people schooled in victory against the odds. Such a belief in victory is exemplified in the recall of the first President of the Dominica Academy of Arts Sciences Dr. Clayton Shillingford who told me his mother bought him a tie during World War II on which was emblazoned: *There will always be an England.*

How well we craft a national narrative on Dominica – or the wider former British West Indian colonies for that matter - will depend on how well we can harness the wellspring of good derived from that heritage grounded in victory and a deep yearning for freedom bequeathed by Britain. Thus far, it is those British values, laws and traditions which have allowed for us to agglutinate. That glue, where not reinforced with best practices, is weakening. That weakening is seen in misdirection of state resources which have nothing to do with national productivity, and the failure to properly investigate an attempted Christmas day 2010 attempted murder of a retired judge and British Navy WW II veteran GON Emmanuel who is involved in a case with the Prime Minister’s lawyer. That such an investigation seems to have stalled even where a confession points to persons close to the Prime Minister, is frankly alarming. We already know that no one has accepted any responsibility to resign over the admitted misconduct committed where tens of thousands of dollars from Dominica’s treasury were diverted to buy garbage bins at almost 90% mark-up from a front company in Pennsylvania. Government apologists sweep such misdeeds under the table and excuse such crime as some partisan campaign by an “opposition cabal.” When a people acquiesce in wrong, are we witnessing the deterioration of the system of values we learnt in the venerable **Student Companion** of the colonial era which taught us: Honesty is the best policy?

That value system which has been our tradition evolved over the years and birthed the abolitionist movement led by William Wilberforce and others.

In 1834 – coupled with uprisings which flickered off and on in the British West Indies - we won victory for freedom's cause with the abolition of slavery by act of parliament. Later those values led to the Moyne Commission. On August 5, 1938 the British Government appointed the West Indian Royal Commission to investigate and to make recommendations on the social and economic conditions in the various territories. The Commission, led by Lord Moyne (hence the term "Moyne Commission") was created to investigate the 1930s worker/farmer rebellions in the British West Indies. The Moyne Commission went on to recommend beneficial social reforms and universal adult suffrage. Yes, Britain has its own problems, as witnessed in the 2011 summer uprising. However, within that society there exist self-correcting mechanism to study and redress wrong as such arise. No government of Britain could stand in the face of what has transpired on Dominica. They would be compelled to resign.

Despite the several instances of wrongdoing (some openly confessed to as in the failure to pay land tax and the garbage bin scandal) by the Roosevelt Skerit Administration, not one commission has been empanelled. Not one head of department or minister has resigned. Why have we jettisoned the tradition of empanelling commissions of inquiry where misconduct by the government, or a pressing matter in national controversy which impact the public good, arises? Why? Can a nation agglutinate over such misdeeds? Or will a nation implode where the national mind, and its value system, is so corroded as to be unrecognizable as anything worthy of respect due a nation.

As an independent state we must then define that which agglutinates the national mind. Over what principles shall we adhere? Shall we hew to our traditions of governance where they are noble? Or shall we scatter our noble principles of governance in the public interest to the four winds? Recent history re the governance of our former Mother Country Britain is worthy of being noted here.

In the December 18, 2011 issue of Politico.co.uk the headlines read: ***Foolish Tory MP Fired from Government Job over Nazi Photo***. The article went on to state:

Junior ministerial aide Aidan Burley's involvement in a Nazi-themed stag party has cost him his job. The Conservative MP for Cannock Chase was pictured at a party in the French ski resort of Val Thorens

where the groom-to-be was dressed in a uniform similar to that worn by SS officers.

Merely being next to someone in a Nazi uniform was enough to cost a junior minister in the British government his job, where his mere position next to someone in SS uniform showed lack of respect to those who died fighting fascism. The war in which the SS committed its crimes is more than 60 years gone, yet strong British values- abhorrent to the SS and its kind- remain. Shall we follow such exemplary conduct and demand that our leaders resign where they have acted contrary to the public interest? We are less than 40 years removed from an administrative link with Britain and we already destroying values pertinent to rule of law on our island. How can we long survive, where we jettison good order and best practices?

What shall be the quality of the national backbone, if we are to have any? What value system shall we abide where thievery of state funds is trivialized with the defense: "Leave my Prime Minister alone! "De Prime Minister is a good man; he build a road. Even if he take a little thing under de table, de opposition use to do it too. Come on comrade, you must support de party; you are a Labourite!" What does such squalid adoration of shameful conduct mean for the national mind? Can we agglutinate in such a context? What kind of glue can cause the national family to cohere in the face of such conduct?

Now, as we approach 2012, it is critical that we examine the nature of our national culture and its value system. We mislead our young where we have them believe that culture is simply about feting; culture is more than reggae, calypso, or zouk. It is more than that which we imbibe on festive occasions such as sorrel, ginger beer, or rum. Culture is more than that which we may wear, as in a madras head tie. Culture is more than that superficiality with which we have become familiar. Culture is about our entire value system and how we lead our lives. The Germans are known for disciplined effort and a competence in engineering. The Japanese are known for making great sacrifices in team building and are known to be a highly organized society; they also known to be thrifty. Our Caribbean neighbors, the Barbadians, are known to value learning; they are possessed of a national pride which favors honest leaders. What shall we be known for? Yes, we are an independent nation, but shall we retain that which made Britain great? Shall we buttress law, and rule of law, where persons who are in the chain of command – and have admitted wrongdoing - pay

the price by resigning with honor? Shall we grow to demand honest and competent national leadership? Or shall we resign ourselves to witnessing the slow deterioration of values, which causes our island to descend slowly into inequity?

The character of our people – or what constitutes the national mind - is the question of the hour. We cannot build anything strong or enduring where we have no value system, or where we depart from the good we were taught. *Wikipedia* notes that Dominica's literacy rate stands at 88%. However, what does such a relatively high literacy rate mean? We cannot build a strong nation where our level of literacy is not reflected in the competence and good character of those we elect to lead us. What is the character of the national mind or - value system - where a Prime Minister is allowed to remain in office when he boldly states an intention to disregard law and constitution? What is the level of national pride where foreign crooks are designated to represent the island overseas, or the national birthright posted for sale on-line?

Our values dictate our conduct, so we must pay keen heed to nourishing strong values in keeping with our best traditions. Today, precious few in the civil service or civil society organizations raise their voices in opposition to government misconduct. A tyranny of silence reigns and only a few brave souls sally forth. When shall Dominicans, as a body of conscious citizens embrace civic duty and call wrong by its name. When? If we are to survive as a nation, that which directs the national mind is a matter which must command much study and scholarly review – only a fragment of which is addressed here. I ask that we commence a national debate to that end, without delay. Excusing away the inexcusable, will not do.