

Before The Second Exodus

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I was attending university in California during the mid 1970's when it had become fashionable for hundreds of Jamaicans to flee their country because they were terrified at the prospects of the brand of socialism being embraced by the government of the day. I can still remember talking to a certain minister of religion who, along with other members of his family, had fled to California. I felt his pain when he confessed that he was working as an orderly in an area hospital. He was aware that his job responsibilities included, but was not limited to, taking samples of stool, urine and blood to the clinical laboratory housed in the lower level of the facility. He said that it was a struggle for him to take care of his family on the minimum wage he was being paid.

My dilemma had to do with the fact that this was a minister at whose feet I had sat as a youngster attending church in Jamaica. Here was a man who owned houses and apartment buildings back home, a man whose material and scholastic attainment were the envy of many of my high school classmates who were considering the gospel ministry. Now he had been reduced to carrying human wastes and mopping floors for people in a

strange land. I have to confess that I began to have second thoughts about the idea of returning home to work and live.

The Pastor was many years my senior and yet he wanted to know from me whether I thought he had done the right thing. I was as embarrassed for him as I was frightened about my own prospects of returning to Jamaica to serve my own people in my own land. I came to learn afterwards that there were thousands of Jamaicans who sold their houses way below market value, including furniture and cars, and fled the wrath which was perched on the horizon. The question as to whether that threat was real or imagined is probably still being debated. The reality of the fear which many felt then cannot, however, be argued since many gave up their livelihood and subsequently lost their lives in an effort to escape it.

That mass exodus of some of our best minds as well as some of our most successful business persons left behind many millionaires who had the nerves to hold their ground when others were running. It also resulted in thousands of our country men having to start all over in countries where they did not intend to live. The big question today is whether there are reasons enough to justify the fears being expressed by many who have already left

our shores in the face of recent development. Is this the beginning of a second exodus? If there is one undeniable fact it is that things in the seventies were nowhere as dangerous as they are today. We have created killing fields in our inner cities and the criminal is having a field day all across our land.

I happen to know that there have been scores of Jamaicans who have decided to leave Jamaica to settle elsewhere because they have felt that things are getting out of hand. This they have been doing without fanfare, but they have been doing so with heavy hearts and feelings of hopelessness for our beautiful island home. No, there have been no real estate giveaways, no emergency fly outs, no hush, hush garage sales of expensive paintings at half price, no waiting overseas for the agent to accept “any reasonable offer”, but people are quietly relocating in appreciable numbers. We continue to be poorer for their leaving and the developed countries continue to benefit from the expertise and know-how of the very people whom we desperately need to help us make the transition from being “third world” and “developing.”

Let us stop fooling ourselves. There are thousands of others who feel extremely vulnerable, unprotected, exposed and unsafe. Something has to happen in this country to help our people to recover from the frightful dilemma which has gripped all Jamaicans as crime and violence spiral further and further out of control. Failure to stop the further spread of this dangerous cancer will result in a second exodus which will leave us alive, but crippled in ways which are unimaginable. There are too many horror stories of countries, some not too far away from us, which are as bereft of trees to prevent natural disasters as they are void of trained professionals to man their services due to the brain drain resulting from wanton killings by ungovernable citizens gone mad. These people see no difference between cutting down trees and cutting down people.

Earlier today, Sunday April 25, 2005, I watched in shame as CNN carried stories of demonstrations in Atlanta, Georgia where Americans expressed disgust at the number of illegal immigrants “infesting” their country. The Documentary entitled, “Immigrant Nation, Divided Country” stated that there are as many as twenty million such illegal immigrants in the United States. You and I know that a disproportionate number of those illegal persons are from right here in Jamaica. Those of you who watched the

programme would have noted that many of the Americans expressed fears that immigrants are changing American culture. They fear that these people could turn America into a third world country.

Traveling and living where we please are freedoms which we must continue to enjoy. It may be wise, however, for us to make certain that we have a country to return to when things go wrong elsewhere. I learned many valuable lessons from those who ran back home after the 9/11 disaster in the US and Hurricane Ivan in Cayman. In the case of the latter, many were sent home by the Cayman authorities. After all, as Jamaicans, we are “foreigners” in any other land. All of us treasure the novelty of admitting that we are Jamaicans when people overseas praise our music, our genius, our accent, our country’s natural beauty and the quality of our work. We must not get to the place where we hide our passports, deny our heritage, fake our accents and become terrified about coming home for Christmas. Regrettably, many Jamaicans have been murdered while visiting home for Christmas or to attend funerals.

We are not yet at the end of April, and the murder count has already passed 540 for the year. It is frightening to contemplate where we are headed for

the year at this rate. I know that there is no quick fix or broad-brushed panacea to bring about any instant solution to our present dilemma. We are going to have to embark on a mixture of short, medium and long range measures to address these problems. You will forgive me if I fall short of your own lofty expectations, but I knew that you wanted to do your bit:

1. Make Witness Protection a Private Sector Initiative

It does not take a whole lot to make people lose confidence in a highly sensitive programme such as this. In the last few weeks, the news media have done several pieces about people who have said that they were not given what they were promised. There were even reports which hinted that there was insensitivity meted out to some who were later exposed and killed. Of course, while I respect the right of the media to expose what they see fit, I have wondered about the timing of this one. In the new scenario, the state could still provide most of the funding, but this programme would be managed by a small Board of, say, seven persons chosen by the Police, the Military and the Private Sector. **These persons would be charged with the solemn responsibility of ensuring that those who put their lives on the line to put a dent in crime remain alive and safe.**

By way of commentary, Jamaica is a very small place. It is not practical to attempt to relocate a high risk witness here. I am no expert at witness protection and I do not know what is being done presently, but I imagine that relocation out of the country doesn't have to be permanent. I think that no witness should be encouraged to be a ward of the state for the rest of his or her life. At that rate, it would be impossible to fund the thing in the long term. After all, witnesses must not be led to believe that they are just helping the government; they need to know that they are also helping themselves and their communities. Finally, we must ensure that protection and resettlement amenities are provided without regard for rank, status or connection. The fact is that a life is like unto a vote, each person has only one and each is equally important.

This programme needs to be working, especially at a time when people must be willing to say what they know to help stem this tide of death and mayhem. It must also enjoy the highest level of trust and confidence as people in households, districts, communities and even gangs contemplate the decision to come forward and tell what they know to put an end to this madness which is about to destroy all of us. We can't have the Minister of National Security and police superintendents appealing for people to come

forward and give information while the people with the information are terrified about their safety should they decide to say what they know.

2. Return Early Education to the Churches

I am well aware that some of you are bighting your lips in anger at this seemingly simplistic approach to solving our problems. But let us be honest; were we not a more controlled, rational society when the education system was run by our churches? If you care to admit it, the Headmasters and the Headmistresses who ran our schools commanded respect and turned out pupils who were fit to take their places in the wider society. And for those who exclaim that things and times have changed, I beg to submit that those are our problems. The role of the church in the building of our system of education in this country must not be downplayed nor should it be forgotten.

It is worthy of note that the church did not relinquish its responsibility to the nation in the area of primary and secondary education. Rather, the financial constraints forced them to either close the schools or give them over to the government of the day. The fact is that successive governments might have done well to provide the funding needed for the church to continue to

operate these schools. The error has been that we have refused to see the relationship between academic preparation, on the one hand, and discipline, refinement and good manners on the other. Unfortunately, it is the same people who benefited from this system of rounded education who put the structures in place to change it. We owe our children an apology! The roughness and the crudeness which play out on minibuses, taxis and in our school yards are all testimonies that we mistakenly threw away a good thing. We may do well to get it back for that is part of the solution to rebuilding and reshaping the Jamaican society.

3. Make the National Youth Service Compulsory

On average, our students are entering college at age sixteen or earlier. This is a whole two years earlier than students in the US or Great Britain, for example. In addition to the fact that these students would be helped with a later start, the country would benefit from their input for nation building. At the end of the two year period of service, they would be matured and ready for the business of serious study. **It should be interesting to see how their grade averages would improve in the freshman year.**

There would be less pressure on the system at the tertiary level and places like the Students Loan Bureau would get a breather as it caters to fewer students competing for the limited number of dollars in the system. Let us not forget the big help which this would give to some parents who would get some time to save some money for the next child to go to college. The students would work for a stipend out of which they would learn to save as they prepare for higher studies. Those who do not move immediately to higher studies would go to the world of work or to training institutes with some experience and a good work ethic.

There is, however, one other big benefit from a programme such as this, and that is the satisfaction which each student will receive from having given something back to country and fellowmen very early in life. The virtues of volunteerism and the sheer satisfaction of giving back to the community will help to build youngsters of sound character who will become aware that everything is not about money. It is understood that doing youth service would provide training in areas such as security, disaster preparedness, building construction, counseling, teaching, money management, caring for the aged, paramedical techniques, operating child centers, drug awareness, telecommunications, basic auto mechanics and agriculture, among other

skills. Business houses would be compensated through tax incentives and cheap labour as they provide spaces for these youngsters to gain experience.

4. Music & Arts Compulsory through High School.

We have allowed our young men to be misguided into the belief that thuggery and shabby dressing are signs of toughness. Those who are not rapping are slapping and there is the feeling among them that school is a place where you pass the time on the way to becoming the consummate thugboy. Unfortunately, there are persons in the wider society who encourage this brand of behavior because it affords them the right raw material for the business in which they are engaged. Let us not fool ourselves, it is these same boys who join the gangs, sell the drugs for their bosses and collect extortion money on behalf of the “family.”

The discipline associated with music and other art forms will help to focus these youngsters and serve to smooth some of the rough edges. What is more, they will emerge as people who can do more than the traditional DJ since they will know some music and will be able to provide a better mix to the reggae and gospel product. For the potential which music has to bring in

money, these youngsters would be able to say no to those who want to take them down the paths of destruction. Just imagine the high school student who spends time on a keyboard, picking out that elusive note instead of watching gang movies on cable or smoking weed with the boys. I have seen the transformation as a choirmaster grabs the attention of his high school singers. I have witnessed the difference in male students who must spend time counting beats and shaping pottery as they seek to meet the prescribed standards set by teachers who will accept nothing but the highest standard of work. I have seen the look of accomplishment on faces after the item, the well rendered item of music was complete and the crowd clapped in disbelief and appreciation. “Yes, the one who did the solo piece is in fact Miss Mary’s son. Yes, the same one who used to”

My other suggestions will follow next week.