

The thoughts presented here are part of my CHARTER FOR CHANGE for Barbados, compiled prior to the recent general election. I shall offer them to this forum in a serialized form.

CHARTER FOR CHANGE

**By
Olutoye Walrond**



Today, like never before, our country is poised to enter a future of ominous possibilities. I do not recall a time when I have felt such grave concern for the future of my country as I now do. If ever a country needed a charter for change, it is this one. If ever a people needed hope, it is the people of Barbados. I hope this essay will contribute to the formulation of that charter and the realization of that hope.

With the abolition of slavery and the introduction of universal adult suffrage in 1950, Barbados was set on the highway to a free and potentially prosperous society. The groundwork needed for this was laid by men like Sir Grantley Adams, Wynter Crawford and the other stalwarts of the Barbados Labour Party in the first half of the 20th. century. Subsequent governments, led by Errol Barrow, Tom Adams et al, made their own contributions.

But the prosperity of which the island was capable was stymied for lack of visionary leadership in leaders who, for the most part, saw themselves and their country as appendages of the British Empire, rather than people in their own right, with the ability to manage their affairs and determine their own values, policies and systems. This lack of confidence in self manifests itself in myriad ways, not least of which is an apparent resolute aversion to change, especially change that threatens any of the objects, traditions and values of the colonial

power. It is my contention that this national inertia is responsible for retarding the country's progress and, indeed, for the current perilous state of our economy.

The fortunes of a people hinge very much on the kind of leaders they choose. Wise and visionary leaders with liberated minds can be their salvation; weak and visionless leaders who lack confidence can retard their progress and even lead to their downfall. The examples of Singapore and Cuba – to name a few – are there for all to see.

Let's look at Singapore. The territory is made up of a main island less than twice the size of Barbados and about sixty associated islets. This is Singapore of "*the Singapore model*" fame. The transformation of this archipelago from an impoverished nation with high levels of illiteracy and unemployment into one of the world's most developed states is one of the best testimonies to the power of visionary leadership.



Singapore

The first thing the government headed by Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, did was to establish an infra-structure for industrial activity by creating a series of industrial estates. It then established the Singapore Economic Development Board to promote the country among foreign investors as a place they would want to put their money. In time, branches of the Board would be set up in Europe, Asia and the United States.

At the same time the government invested heavily in the training of Singaporeans, both at home and abroad, in high tech industrial skills. Foreign direct investment flowed into Singapore over time, by the year 2001 accounting for 85% of manufactured exports.

Today, Singapore, with no mineral resources, is one of Asia's and the world's most prosperous nations. Its port is the second busiest in the world; its unemployment rate among the lowest and its quality of life among the best in Asia. What did Singapore have going for it that we don't? Nothing, except a leader with a liberated mind, whose vision for his people was not to be clones of the British wearing winter jackets in 80-degree temperatures and glorying in titles of 'Sir', 'Dame', CBE and OBE. He had a vision that his people could be masters of information technology, putting billions into the Singapore treasury.

There are some who counter the Singapore example by saying that its political culture (Lee Kuan Yew being a benevolent dictator) was the foundation for its prosperity, the suggestion being that in our democratic societies we could not achieve the same. It is a bogus argument, since the ideas and policies that led to Singapore's progress are independent of its political system.

Any country can promote industrial development by foreign, direct investment. Any country can train its young people in information technology skills. In fact our own E.W Barrow did a bit of that in the 1960's. We don't have to adopt Singapore's political system to use its model for economic development.

I humbly suggest that unless we change the traditional colonial mind-set of our leaders we will not go very far.

In the next installment I shall deal with reform of the public service.