

The political graveyard

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Last Friday, we observed that Kamla Persad-Bissessar had created history in Trinidad and Tobago by becoming the country's first female prime minister. Equally noteworthy, in her heady rise to the top in just four months, Mrs. Persad-Bissessar consigned the two men who had dominated much of the country's politics during the past two decades – Basdeo Panday and Patrick Manning, the long-time maximum leaders of the UNC and the People's National Movement (PNM) respectively – to the political graveyard.

Last December, based on an opinion poll he had conducted, the eminent Trinidadian academic and political scientist, Professor Selwyn Ryan, concluded that “Both Mr. Manning and Mr. Panday seem locked in a ‘race to the bottom,’” given both men's hubristic tendencies and their declining popularity within their respective parties and across the nation.

Of course, Mr. Panday had the dubious distinction of winning that particular race. But Mr. Manning has swiftly joined him at “the bottom,” as if to confirm the cynical view that the two erstwhile political strongmen were joined at the metaphorical hip in some sort of perverse union that would ensure that Trinidad and Tobago would be, for as long as they were around, subject to the whims and excesses of their one-man leadership.

Soon after Mrs. Persad-Bissessar's election as UNC leader, Dr Ryan wrote: “The disdainful way in which the party electorate dealt with Mr. Panday was a warning to others that maximum leaders have expiratory [sic] dates which catch up with them if they hang around too long. Term limits apply whether they are constitutionally mandated or not” (Trinidad Express, January 31, 2010). The “disdainful way” Dr Ryan refers to was the magnitude of the reversal suffered by Mr. Panday at the hands of the UNC voters, somewhere in the order of 10:1 in favour of Mrs. Persad-Bissessar.

Unfortunately for Mr. Manning, he did not take the hint. And if ever proof was needed of how out of touch he was with reality and the mood of the people, then one only has to consider not so much the humbling defeat he and his party suffered at the polls, but the humiliating treatment meted out to him by his own party last Thursday, at Balisier House, the PNM's headquarters in Port of Spain.

Having rightfully assumed “full responsibility” for the PNM's loss on election night, Mr. Manning duly resigned as party leader on Thursday – a little belatedly in the eyes of many – only to offer himself, astonishingly, as interim leader until the party's General Council could meet to choose a new leader. This last desperate attempt to hold onto power to appoint the PNM's senators and presumably to influence the choice of his successor was, to put it mildly, not well received by the PNM hierarchy and rank and file.

Indeed, the very people who had never previously mustered the courage to tell the man derisively dubbed the “emperor” by his detractors, that he had no clothes, when his naked lust for greater executive power, his arrogant contempt of the opinions of others and a host of other egocentric

political sins were all too visible to everyone else, now rejected him. Even the party chairman, Conrad Enill, a man who owed his political advancement to Mr. Manning, washed his hands of his former mentor. The picture of Mr. Manning, hounded out of Balisier House last Thursday night was that of a broken man yet to comprehend the enormity of his fall. The disdain experienced by Mr. Panday in January was nothing compared to the unbecoming abuse and venom suffered by Mr Manning last week.

It is not only the PNM that has turned on Mr. Manning. The Trinidadian media appear to be freer with their criticisms; they are less veiled, less coded. It is as if the country as a whole feels relieved of the burden of Mr. Manning's leadership and of the associated mismanagement and corruption. As journalist Judy Raymond writing in the Trinidad Express on May 30 put it, in an echo of Dr Ryan's words, "Political leaders have expiry dates, and Mr. Manning had passed his."

Mr. Manning is history and there is little sympathy for him, because of what many in Trinidad and Tobago consider his Burnhamesque behaviour and because, in the judgment of most, he precipitated his own fall. Indeed, few are looking for the positives in his 39 years as an MP, his leadership of the PNM since 1986 and his two stints as prime minister.

Mark Anthony said in his famous funeral speech in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar:

The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar.

So it may well be with Mr. Manning. And even though he has retained his seat in parliament, it is difficult at this point to see how he can rise again from the political graveyard.

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