

The Real Race Factor

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I wanted to offer a point of view on the defeat of the PNM, then I saw Trevor Sudama's account in the Express (May 29), and I thought maybe I should look at it before I wrote, only to find that Mr Sudama had not gone beyond Crazy and De Fosto. I remember him in the NAR complaining 'what budget?' when he thought he was left out of Selby Wilson's budgetary process, and he was among those who deserted the old UNC, leading to PNM's ascendancy the last time. Some politicians are now caught in purgatory. They are not with Ms Persad-Bissessar, and not with Mr Panday.

The most unsatisfactory aspect of Mr Sudama's analysis was his comment that the PNM's appeal was 'primarily confined to Afro-Trinidadians but who comprise just 38 per cent of the population. Indo-Trinidadians were made to feel excluded'.

Here we go again. The UNC comes to power, and an East Indian scholar and former minister of government offers us this tired, phony lament about exclusion, under the guise of 'analysis'. The mischief here is the statement, 'Indo-Trinidadians were made to feel excluded'. This kind of thing mischievously stirs up the worst emotions, and for what reason?

It takes no real analysis for anyone to understand that the main political parties in the country embody the aspirations of the two major ethnic groups. We don't have Democrats and Republicans here as they do in the US. Neither do we have Labourites and Conservatives, as they do in the UK.

Our parties do not stand for particular ideologies. What we have here are Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. As Morton Klass points out, our parties reflect the aspirations of the major ethnic groups. That has been the basis of the two main parties historically and now. And for this we look to the reaction of the people, not the leaders, after the votes are counted. We should not chastise each other for that. It is history that accounts for this, not anything else.

Even so, Mr Sudama would have to explain why 17 of the 41 candidates offered by the PNM were East Indians, and why there were seven East Indians in the cabinet of the party just defeated? These data do not speak to exclusion. Or I could send him to UWI, or Mt Hope, or the Hugh Wooding Law School, or UTT. Everybody gets GATE. Exclusion is a tired argument in this country, and if you are wearing a scholarly hat, you have to resist tribal instinct.

What we can't have in the country now, are Indian scholars such as Mr Sudama kicking sand in the face of black people. We had that the last time, the chest beating, the taunting. We need to be more thoughtful and mature about this victory. In the Arima market last weekend, people were shopping and bantering as usual, the two races interacting as before. That is how we are. The country is moving on.

Instead, then, of writing about why I think the PNM lost, I will offer a brief note on why I think the Partnership won.

The first and main reason is that crime and its attendant terror knows no race. All of us, including this writer, have been frustrated with the rampant nature of crime here, and the last government's absence of ideas to stop it.

The second related reason is that the UNC showed itself to be a serious national party by dumping Basdeo Panday, and placing a woman at the helm.

The third reason is that Kamla Persad-Bissessar proved to be a deft politician and leader by bringing Winston Dookeran and COP back into the fold. Mr Dookeran is the most important crossover politician in the country. He is believable, and the ease with which he accepted Ms Persad-Bissessar as leader showed that the UNC could hold at the centre.

The fourth reason is that Tobago came aboard the coalition.

The fifth reason is that Makandal Daaga came aboard. Then Errol McLeod. The Daaga membership had tremendous symbolic and well as substantive appeal to mature black voters who were around in 1970, when he and others changed forever how we as blacks see ourselves.

Accordingly, many black people decided to vote for the coalition, or to stay away. The black vote for the coalition, seen most clearly in the Tobago victories, and the one in Toco, is the story of this election. As it was in 1986, when the Afro-Trinidadian voters abandoned the PNM for what looked like a credible alternative, they have done so again. But this time it is different. Afro-Trinidadians in their numbers voted for an Indian leader. We have to celebrate this advance, and not go back, as Mr Sudama does, to our baser emotions.

We are an educated country now, and a very civil one, as the smoothness of the transition of power will attest, and fair-minded people will have to credit this to the PNM.

Black people are voting conscience, not tribe, so they can't be taken for granted, and PNM has found that out again. The party has to learn from that and re-group. It has to learn from the UNC that it needs democratic provisions to change leadership. A change of leadership may have been a better PNM solution than the calling of elections.

Accordingly, we can't have scholars and opportunists like Trevor Sudama, now on the outside of the new UNC, coming with the ideas of the old UNC, trying to stir up the old resentments. Black people voted in droves for this new government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and deserve to be treated with respect and parity by it.

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