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Sufferers' Manifesto: A Challenge to the Best in Us and Among Us

Owen Everard James

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Sufferers' Manifesto It is undeniable that new, unusual or radical approaches are now required to address Jamaica's intractable problems. This is not only necessary but imperative. As a nation, Jamaica is currently faced with perhaps the most crucial set of choices in its history. These choices involve a few critical questions: Do we continue to genuflect to the status quo or do we actively, in good conscience and with clear purpose, attempt to change course in terms of how we are governed, how we hold those who govern accountable and how we transform our system of governance to meet the challenges we face? Why do we not recognize the reality that unchanged behavior in the face of unchanging problems is most unlikely to bring about changed outcomes? Our colonial overlords immersed us completely into two-party-system-democracy as willing, subservient converts. Our own brethren, as assertive, opportunistic surrogates and hopeful partners in the pursuit of national Independence, consolidated our conversion. Outcomes over 50 years of Independence have been grossly deficient and disaster inducing. Worst of all, overcommitment to the status quo is built into the DNA of traditional Democracy, making it harmfully averse to change. Amazingly, we continue to embrace and vigourously defend a system that was the instrument of our subjugation for centuries; that defined us as chattel; that compensated slave owners for loss of property at abolition to the tune of twenty billion U.S. dollars (current value) but saw no parallel need to compensate freed slaves; that relies on the goodwill of the uncompensated descendants of slaves for understanding and pardon while questioning the rationality of reparation even as it claims to be the most virtuous of all systems of governance. It is not surprising that Democracy in general is in crisis in old, new and aspiring democracies. Even America's vaunted claims about the exemplary nature of its democratic practices are now questioned with unparalleled legitimacy. It should surprise no one that among a number of former Caribbean colonies there is a growing movement to seek reparations for slavery. Those who think that this amounts to a fool's errand should rethink their position. Apart from the pure and simple righteousness of the claim, the fact that the British could have so easily calculated compensation for loss of property eliminates the common contention that there is no reasonable way in which to calculate the value to be assigned to reparation. The proclaimed natural benevolence of traditional Democracy is a myth. There is nothing naturally endearing or culturally exemplary, let alone altruistically unique, about traditional Democracy. The continuing favorable progress of transitional systems of governance in places such as China and Singapore strongly supports this contention, as do the visible institutional dysfunction and clearly systemic societal failures in places like the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece and Spain, in the face of serious economic challenges. By the very tenets of democratic systems we should expect to see Democracy directed Capitalism. Instead, we are witnessing the most harmful demonstrations of Capitalism directed Democracy in response to an unusually disruptive and extended global recession. It would appear that while Democracy is put ahead of the welfare of those it claims to serve, Capitalism is put ahead of Democracy. This is a most instructive dilemma.

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