

Slow-walking Republicanism

Phillip Paulwell



GUEST COLUMNIST

ON MARCH 23 this year, Prime Minister Holness told Prince William, the then Duke of Cambridge, and Kate Middleton, the then Duchess of Cambridge (now the Prince and Princess of Wales) that Jamaica was “moving on”. That comment was perhaps the clearest signal to date that the Government was planning to move Jamaica forward to become a republic.

Instead, the Government was slow off the mark and little was done until very recently. There was a Cabinet reshuffle and a new minister of legal and constitutional affairs, Marlene Malahoo Forte, was appointed. A Constitutional Reform Committee (CRC) is supposed to be appointed and the membership was stated to include “representatives from the Government, Parliamentary Opposition, relevant experts, and the wider society”. Recent statements from the Government suggest that this might be happening soon.

The Cabinet reshuffle is the only thing that has happened with effect from January 11 this year. There is still no CRC, and one does not know where the Government is going with its actual policy intentions on republicanism.

When the Government appoints a CRC, how long will it take for that body to consider what will be assigned to it and submit its report before any action can be taken having regard to the time-delay procedures in the Constitution for making this particular amendment?

Jamaica now has a new head of state in the person of King Charles III. The message was already conveyed to his son that we are “moving on”, and yet it has taken a long time to show that we are serious about becoming a republic.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

At minimum, there should have been a ministerial statement announcing the official formation of the CRC and its

members together with its terms of reference some months ago. Will it be a government-dominated committee that will seek to impose single-party hegemony on the subject? This will not be the way to go.

Surely, the Government could find a way to seek national consensus on this matter by making it an inclusive CRC so that we can treat this matter as a Jamaican initiative and not an initiative of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP).

Does the JLP Government of Prime Minister Holness envisage going to the electorate in a referendum in which both the JLP and the People’s National Party (PNP) can hold hands together and seek the support of our population on a single cause or are they trying to find a way to make the republican idea their own to the exclusion of the PNP and civil society groups?

This does not have to be a wholesale constitutional reform that will seek to include other initiatives that will cause controversy and we find ourselves co-mingling the republican initiative with other issues that may divide the electorate and cause the republican idea to fail.

What is needed is a single-issue piece of legislation that will replace the monarchy of Jamaica with a republic of Jamaica. Others in the Caribbean have attempted to undertake wider constitutional reform while embedding the republican amendment in a bill that sought to overhaul the rest of the Constitution, and the entire bill was rejected, and with it went the republican amendment.

St Vincent and the Grenadines suffered such a fate in November 2009 when its Constitution Bill, which had been passed after the required time-delay procedure and the special majority in the Parliament, failed at the referendum stage and was unable to earn a simple majority, far less the special two-thirds majority of the electorate that was required.

Bundling the republican initiative together with other constitutional reforms is not the way to go to become a republic. There can be discussion around the mechanism by which a president of Jamaica can be selected or elected, but the intention is not to overhaul the monarchy to the extent that the King and his governor general are to be replaced



FILE

Prince William and Kate, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, aboard a Land Rover that was used to transport William’s grandmother, Queen Elizabeth, in 1962. The couple attended a commissioning parade at the Jamaica Defence Force headquarters, Up Park Camp during their visit in March.

by an executive president.

EXPECTATION

The dialogue to date has an expectation that the quasi-ceremonial functions of the governor general will be shifted to the presidency and Jamaica will no longer have King Charles III, his heirs, and his successors as our Head of State. This should not be too complicated as we can maintain the expectation that the president will function above the political fray to the same extent that the governor general has been functioning ever since we became independent sixty years ago.

Barbados addressed the issue by simply making changes to the monarchy and introducing the Constitution (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2021 on September 20, 2021. The bill went through all of

its parliamentary stages in their House of Assembly on September 28, 2021. It went to their Senate on September 29, 2021, and then was taken through all of its remaining stages on October 6, 2021, and passed.

On October 12, 2021, Dame Sandra Mason, the then governor general, was jointly nominated by the prime minister and the leader of the Opposition as the sole nominee for the office of president. On October 20, 2021, she was formally elected by Parliament to become the first president of Barbados, and she was sworn into office on November 30, 2021 (Barbados’ Independence day).

All of that did not take very long because there was the determination and political will to drive the process on a single issue. The remaining constitutional changes that may be desired can then become the subject of wider national consultation and subsequent drafting. Let us not delay ourselves in this moment of national consensus on the issue of becoming a republic so that we can boldly march forward to reclaiming our state from its current monarchical status to become a republic.

Let us move forward with certainty to the Republic of Jamaica in time for our 61st anniversary of independence.

■ *Phillip Paulwell is member of parliament for Kingston East and Port Royal and former minister of science, technology, energy, and mining. Send feedback to columns@gleanerjm.com.*

MIDDLE

CONTINUED FROM G1

Why should Joe Buddy or his political party be any different? As long as we allow FBI operatives into Jamaica to conduct “joint” operations with the JCF/JDF against alleged money-laundering drug kingpins, Buddy will continue to smile at us through his “darkers” but do nothing about the flood of American guns into the island causing mayhem, death, and destruction of Jamaica’s social fabric.

And, wait for it! Get ready for President Desantis in January 2025!

Speaking of the rending of Jamaica’s social fabric, I see that the exemplary auditor general has once again exposed feckless government spending by some agencies, including the HAJ and the Health Ministry. Folks, it’s time our political parties stop talking through both sides of their mouths about how much more ethical they are than their opponents and how much better it’ll be if only we vote for them. This epidemic of handing out government contracts like confetti and paying out multimillions to arbitrary contractors for uncertified work is a fundamental national problem. Now we hear that “care packages” paid for by our tax dollars were being distributed like paper towels in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria without any MOH database or other proof of delivery? And MPs are now “allotted” extra tax dollars to give out Christmas Bullo work?

What the actual bludnaught? MPs are legislators not godfathers, government contract awarders, or Santa Claus! This fundamental flaw in Jamaica’s governance has been with us for 60 years. Why would it change with yet another change of government?

The real problem is the farcical, inequitable way government collects taxes and gives us NOTHING in return. We the poor and vulnerable (wealthy corporations wriggle through every available loophole) pay 25 per cent income tax, 15 per cent GCT, 5.75 per cent education tax, three or six per cent NIS, Customs duty, SCT, gas tax, and God knows how many more hidden taxes.

What do we get in return? Our taxes are supposed to fund healthcare, yet the financial hardships suffered by hard-working Jamaicans who fall ill are monstrous. Government hospitals (including St Joseph’s, which is categorised as a “public/private” institution, and the UHWI – a regional institution)

charge exorbitant fees in addition to the tax dollars they receive from the Government.

FREE HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION

Why can’t we have free healthcare across the board after fundamentally reforming our taxation system to ensure that the wealthiest pay the most tax?

The UK’s no-tax threshold is £12,750.00 (approximately J\$2.5 million) after which tax rates increase gradually from 20 per cent (up to £50,270.00), then 40 per cent (up to £150,000.00), and 45 per cent (over £150,000.00). Their National Health Service is fully funded out of tax revenues and free to all. Additionally, the cost of drugs is lowered by the absence of enough private-sector competitors to drive prices up. English government-funded schools are free to all.

Finland has one of the world’s highest tax rates (averaging 39 per cent). But healthcare is free. No Finn goes bankrupt because he/she fell ill. Education is free in Finland even for international students. It’s the same in Denmark.

It’s past time Jamaica underwent radical reconstruction to eliminate the political middlemen guzzling in the trough of our tax dollars so we can enjoy free healthcare and free education as constitutional rights. We can afford it. The auditor general reported \$90 million unaccounted for at the HAJ and \$400m at the MOH. The MOH can claim emergency requirements regarding COVID quarantines. But there’s no excuse for not ensuring some form of procurement paper trail and ex-post-facto accounting even if there’s no time to bring in lawyers to peer over spectacles balanced on the tips of noses in order to prepare formal contracts dotting every “i” and crossing every “t”. It’s important to remember that you’re not spending your own money. You MUST have proper records or be vulnerable to suspicion (rightly or wrongly) of corruption facilitation for which accountability must reside somewhere.

The HAJ is another kettle of rotten fish entirely.

This tip of this iceberg has uncovered almost a half-billion tax dollars carelessly spent. So with a proper system of accountable governance, we can eliminate gravalicious trough-guzzling middlemen and provide free education and free healthcare directly, especially to the very young and the very old.

Peace and Love!

■ *Gordon Robinson is an attorney-at-law. Email feedback to columns@gleanerjm.com*

WE
ARE
MOVING

We wish to advise that our **JMMB Ocho Rios branch** will be relocating to our new location in the **Island Village Shopping Centre**.

Our operating times have been adjusted.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2022
EXTENDED OPENING HOURS
 8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2022
CLOSED

We will re-open on **MONDAY, NOVEMBER 21**, for regular business hours at our new location.

Please be reminded that some JMMB services may be accessed 24 hours a day at any of our 16 JMMB Bank ATMs islandwide or on JMMB Moneyline at moneyline.jmmb.com.

JMMB Bank Visa Debit cards can also be used at any other ATM that accepts Visa cards and point-of-sale terminals.

CUSTOMIZED SOLUTIONS • BANKING • INVESTMENTS • CAMBIO • INSURANCE BROKERS • MONEY TRANSFER

Tel: 998-JMMB 5 6 6 2 | www.jmmb.com

NEWSPAPERARCHIVE

Kingston Gleaner, November 13, 2022, Pg. 63, Kingston, Kingston, JM
<https://newspaperarchive.com/kingston-gleaner-nov-13-2022-p-63/>