

WELCOME

Professor Emeritus the Honourable Errol Miller

Prime Minister of Jamaica the Most Honourable Bruce Golding, Excellency of the Diplomatic Corp, Ambassador Albert Ramdin Assistant Secretary General of the Organisation of American States, Mr Jean-Pierre Kingsley President of the International Federation of Electoral Systems, distinguished delegates and observers of the Association of Caribbean Electoral Organisations, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen all, on behalf of the Electoral Commission of Jamaica it is my privilege and signal honour to welcome you to Jamaica and to this conference. We are delighted that you have again chosen to meet here in Kingston. As kindred organisations that toil in the treacherous waters of conducting elections it is important for us to maintain bonds of solidarity, channels of communication and modalities of building knowledge.

We meet this morning in the aftermath and afterglow of the elections in the United States. I feel sure that we all share in the joy of seeing that the collective will of the American people, individually expressed, disregarded race and ethnicity in electing the President who in their opinion would best lead the American nation in the direction it wishes to go at this time. I feel sure that we who are involved with the electoral process are also pleased to see despite the long duration of the campaign, the intensity of the contest and the length of the lines in some polling places the elections were peaceful; the victor and the vanquished were gracious to each other; and the transfer of power is proceeding seamlessly. While there was attempted character assassination there was definitely no loss of life.

We here in the Caribbean share a similar history of elections with that of the United States. For example, the House of Assembly of Barbados has operated continuously as an elected body since 1652. Jamaica had its first elections in December 1663. However, democracy came later to Caribbean than it did to the United States. Hence, the Caribbean has a 290 year history of elections being contested in a non-democratic framework. However, since the 1940s when adult suffrage and representative government became the norm; our countries have not only held elections regularly within the democratic framework but changed governments repeatedly.

When it comes to the issue of race, gender and elections the Caribbean has long since elected men and women of African ancestry to the highest political offices. My mother tells me of the euphoria that

swept Jamaica after the 1944 elections when the House of Assembly literally changed colour. Each one of our countries can recount the time when barriers of race, colour, ethnicity and gender were shattered.

From our history and experience with race and gender, politics and governance we have learned that the colour or gender of the President or the Prime Minister make no difference to the nature and severity of the issues and problems to be addressed. The issues and problems are decidedly colour-blind, uniformly unisex and definitely unpatriotic. We therefore share the joys of our American brethren without any illusions about the future.

Interestingly the message and the mandate for change that characterised the American elections have been sweeping the Caribbean for the last two to three years. Only one party that has been the government has managed to retain power during this period. That party had the benefit of a booming economy, a divided opposition and a governing party that purge itself of two thirds of its sitting Members of Parliament. Even then that party got less than 50 per cent of the vote. The winds of change are of hurricane force.

Parties in the Caribbean that have come to government with the wind of change beneath their sails have mobilised electorates on the basis of the incompetence and corruption of incumbents, rising crime and violence and high unemployment, especially among youths. In contrast, in the U.S.A the Democratic Party was able to mobilise support on the basis of the economy, the war and health care. Nearing the end of the campaign the collapse of the financial system dramatically imposed itself in the elections.

As an academic who has been co-opted into the electoral process, I cannot help but wonder if these bases upon which change has been predicated are but contextual and symptomatic circumstances of some deeper underlying common causal factors. My eight years of close involvement in the electoral system has led me to become suspicious of the broad brush of incompetence and corruption with which politicians have been painted, and often paint each other. My sense is more of their capitulation to forces within and without which render them practically impotent to implement the mandates on which they were elected. My fear is that repeated cycles of elections and changes of government without meaningful and substantial changes in the life chances of the people will only foster alienation and debilitating departure from the democratic pathway. The instances of sections of urban centres

being captured by gangs that control these areas are worrisome intrusions on the state for which few answers have been forthcoming.

Probably the real significance of the victory of Barack Obama is not his race or him being the first African-American President of the United States. Hopefully the real significance of his victory resides in his calculated and disciplined confrontation of the status quo and conventional wisdom, his willingness to rely on small contributions from large numbers of ordinary people instead of the usual financial sponsors of political office and his understanding and masterful use of new media in mobilising and organising supporters on the ground, especially young people. My prayer is that this new paradigm of the community organiser in campaigning can be translated into governance while in office. Probably, if this happens then government of the people, by the people and for the people will not only flourish in the United States but across the earth.

Again welcome to Kingston, Jamaica and to the conference. May our deliberations be enriching, insightful and edifying. Thank you.

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