

# Let's mimic the right traditions from the Westminster Model of governance



## OUTSIDE LOOKING IN by Rahym Augustin-Joseph

A few months ago, political scientists and students of democracy, looking unto Britain as they changed three Prime Ministers in a relatively short space of time, or left, right and centre as we say in our local parlance, were caught with the burning question of whether this was 'democratic renewal' or 'political instability.'

However, what piqued our interest was also why the political elite of the Caribbean sought to capitalise on this opportunity to convince themselves and Caribbean people that we were stable and competitive democracies because we did not have to deal with these moments in our history.

What the political elite was articulating indirectly without them realising it was that our stable democracies are not marked by the removal of Prime Ministers who no longer maintain the support of the majority in Parliament, but instead, were characterised by a myriad of undemocratic and unstable democratic practices.

Some include Prime Ministers overstaying their utility without term limits, no fixed date for elections, co-opting of the media and the political elite, widespread victimisation and nepotism, excessive powers of the Prime Minister to dissolve parliament and call a snap election when they have lost the confidence of their party, widespread allegations of corruption, first-past-the-post electoral system which distorts the elections result in favour of one party over the other, silencing of the opposition, lack of justificatory approaches when making political decisions among many other issues.

Free, fair, and integrity-based elections are not confined to the declaration of winners at the end of the election and peaceful turnover of governmental power, but encapsulate dealing with many of the above-mentioned issues.

It is this naivety which has caused us to not view the British turnover of Prime Ministers as nothing short of democracy in action, where the party members and the public were not supportive of the direction in which the country was being taken by their leaders. They continually articulated their frustration with the lack of performance and good governance.

As a result, it was an exercise in democracy as once these Prime Ministers realised that they no longer maintained the support of the majority, they resigned, making way for another leader who could command that support. They understood that they existed, only to the extent that they could maintain that support.

The UK has been replete with stories of democracy in action over the past few months and years. Whether it be former Prime Minister Boris Johnson who some argued lost the support of his colleagues, after many attempts at removal, for his treatment of UK conventions and institutions, handling of sexual allegations within his cabinet, or breaking of COVID-19 rules among other infractions. Or whether it be May who determined for herself that her mandate to remove Britain from the EU was not being successfully implemented and therefore lost support, or Truss because of her economic mismanagement.

These Prime Ministers respected the framer's intention and the conventions that one operates as the Prime Minister, subject to the confidence of the Parliament. Once that confidence is lost, it means that their job becomes obsolete, and they must make room for another individual who finds support within the Parliament.

### Watered down Westminster

Instead, in our democracies, you see the opposite, where a Prime Minister who may be losing the support of the majority of their colleagues or is subject to a motion of no confidence tabled in the house does not allow dissenting voices to articulate their positions or resign when they have lost the majority of the support of the Parliament.

As a matter of fact, they dissolve the Parliament and call a snap election and transform the motion of no confidence into a referendum on the entire government as opposed to them as the Prime Minister. One only has to reflect on the words of former Prime Minister Tom Adams, who noted that, "in effect in Barbados, the Prime Minister can play the part of Samson and drag the temple down with him, since if he loses a vote of no confidence, the Prime Minister is not obliged to resign and be replaced with another member who can command a majority of the house. Instead, he can dissolve the Parliament and place every seat of the Parliament at risk."

One must also only look at the actions of former Prime Ministers of St Kitts and Nevis Timothy Harris and Denzil Douglas to ascertain the scope of the differences between the UK and the Caribbean. Is it more checks and balances on the Prime Minister? Is it stronger legislative oversight, and less loyalty to the Party, or does it boil down to the virtues of the men who we elect to the office? Or is it a combination of all? We must look to reform and repudiate the inordinate powers of the Prime Minister which damper the ability of the legislature to perform their supervisory function over the government's performance.

### Individual responsibility of Ministers

It is also interesting that in our adoption of the Westminster model of governance we did not imitate as proper 'mimic men' the democratic safeguards and benchmarks within the British political system regarding individual responsibility.

Recently, the British Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab resigned over allegations of bullying within his Ministry. The investigation dismissed all but two claims levelled at Raab. Raab noted that "Mr Tolley concluded that I had not once, in four and a half years, sworn or shouted at anyone, let alone thrown anything or otherwise, physically intimidated anyone, nor intentionally sought to belittle anyone." However, he noted that he was still "sorry for any unintended stress or offence that any officials felt, as a result of the pace, standards and challenges that I brought to the Ministry of Justice."

Even if there are denials from the Minister, the doctrine of individual responsibility which we have also adopted from the UK mandates that the Minister be responsible for actions and decisions within their Ministry. It is based on the philosophical underpinning that individuals who exercise public office should be held accountable for the actions within their respective ministries, as they are responsible for the overall success of the ministry.

They are expected to ensure that they act in the public interest, exercise good judgement, and follow established laws and procedures. In the absence of this, they must be held personally responsible for any negative consequences that emanate from their actions or inactions.

However, what we see happening within the Commonwealth Caribbean is that Ministers and their leader, the Prime Minister, ignore this principle entirely and recoil or even push back when issues arise within their ministry. At times there is the passing of the buck to the low-level civil servants as opposed to accepting responsibility for actions taken within the respective Ministry. One must only recall our local instance of the Minister of Education, Hon. Kay McConney in relation to the invasive questionnaire from the IDB for children.

It is perhaps one reason why CLR James always lamented against the undemocratic nature of our political system and warned us we should not take too seriously our claim of being a democratic society, beyond free, fair, and integrity-based elections, separation of powers and other basic features of a liberal democracy. However, we had a reflective instinct towards crude authoritarianism on the part of leadership, and these were habits formed and learnt in plantation slavery and the current age demands the careful nurturing of new democratic instincts.

What we can learn within our young democracies from the British is that resignations are also not always required for accountability to be satisfied. Individual responsibility, according to Woodhouse, also includes providing an account to parliament, taking remedial action to remedy the problem or oversight, or last, resigning for grave situations.

However, other than Hon. Floyd Green of Jamaica, who offered his resignation after apologising for breaking the COVID-19 protocol during the period of lockdown in Jamaica, there is little evidence pointing to instances where Ministers have been held accountable for issues within their Ministry. Our democracy has been eroded of any justifiable approaches to governance, where our public officials defend their actions based on 'right' and 'might.'

Instead of accountability, our officials rely on the protection of the Prime Minister, who instead of firing them protects them from public scrutiny. Moreover, there is also an understanding that the media will not cover the subject for over 24 hours, because another subject will pique their interest. Peter Wickham is therefore correct when commenting on this subject, when he noted that if you want a Minister to resign or be fired, the worst thing you can do is ask the Prime Minister for it, as this most times will cause a statement of confidence in the Minister, and they will be cemented there forever.

It is therefore time to re-introduce this conversation as part of our constitutionalism and democracy, where we hold our public officials accountable for actions within their respective Ministries. If we are going to be mimic men within the region, it is always prudent to mimic what is right.

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Parliament is central to the United Kingdom's democratic constitution.

