

OPINION & INSIGHTS

In defence of CARICOM

PART 2

AS I SEE IT



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The movement of services, the right to establishment and the movement of capital are fundamental pillars of CARICOM. Thanks to the bloc's existing framework, nationals can establish businesses or economic enterprises in any member state and must receive treatment no less favourable than that given to locals.

Moreover, CARICOM nationals and companies can provide cross-border services across the region. A consultant in Barbados can advise a client in Grenada, a patient from Saint Lucia can seek medical care in Trinidad, a Jamaican IT firm can set up a branch in Antigua, or an accountant from Belize can offer services in Dominica.

In principle, discriminatory barriers to the movement of services should be dismantled. Yet, as with the free movement of people (discussed in my previous column), challenges persist. However, withdrawing from CARICOM would not magically ease these obstacles; it would exacerbate them. The safeguards ensuring equitable treatment for our citizens would vanish, leaving remaining member states free to impose less favourable terms on our businesses and professionals.

The Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas (RTC) explicitly states that CARICOM nationals must be treated equally among themselves, and no worse than third-party states. Leaving the bloc would severely damage our regional relationships.

The movement of capital further facilitates cross-border transactions, currency convertibility, and access to credit, investments and financial services. Yet, the argument for withdrawal is not just flawed—it's dangerously shortsighted. In an era of global instability and insularity, Caribbean unity is more vital than ever. Only together can we project diplomatic strength, secure favourable international terms, and create viable alternatives for our citizens.

It is naive to think a microstate like Saint Lucia – with 180 000 people and an open, vulnerable economy – could navigate today's turbulent world alone. CARICOM's collective voice has historically carried far greater weight than any single member's – whether in climate advocacy, opposition to the United States embargo on Cuba, diplomatic stances on Venezuela and Haiti, reparations campaigns, or reforms at the IMF and World Bank. While outcomes

aren't always perfect, incremental gains have been achieved through unity – gains that would be impossible by acting alone.

That said, internal disparities persist. More Developed Countries (MDCs), buoyed by oil, gas and stronger economies, hold an advantage over Less Developed Countries (LDCs) like Saint Lucia, which grapple with small markets, underdeveloped manufacturing and limited resources. The result? A lopsided trade dynamic, with MDCs exporting value-added goods while LDCs rely on raw materials.

Withdrawal would not magically resolve these imbalances. The root causes – weak productive capacity, uncompetitive industries, high energy costs and a lack of value-added production – are structural. Instead of retreating, we should push for meaningful capitalisation of the Caribbean Development Fund (CDF), which exists to assist LDCs with financial and technical support, regional competitiveness, and mitigating the uneven effects of trade liberalisation.

None of this is to ignore CARICOM's lingering challenges: improving regional transportation, enhancing security cooperation, advancing free movement

with contingent rights, and harmonising professional standards. Yet despite these hurdles, incremental progress is being made.

Most critically, CARICOM is not just the CSME. It's also the appendage institutions Saint Lucia relies on: CARPHA, CDEMA, UWI, Caribbean Export, the CJ, CCCCC, CXC and others. What happens to our relationship with these bodies if we withdraw? Would we renegotiate access from a weaker position? Or do proponents of withdrawal imagine we could exit the CSME while retaining benefits from its appendages?

We can only have a meaningful conversation about "withdrawal" when reasonable answers to these questions are provided.

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