

OPINION & INSIGHTS

Renewing the call for election debates: Lessons from Jamaica

AS I SEE IT



By Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph



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With much credit, the Saint Lucia Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture recently announced that, in the lead-up to the general elections — expected within the next year — they will invite both political party leaders, Allen Chastanet (Leader of the UWP and Parliamentary Opposition Leader) and Philip J. Pierre (Leader of the SLP and Prime Minister), to present separately at their **Political Forum**.

According to reports, the aim is to “provide a structured platform for political leaders to address key policy issues directly related to the business community,” exclusively for Chamber members.

The Chamber’s president explained that the initiative seeks to “fill a vacuum” created by the lack of substantive, issue-driven debates in the current political climate. The goal is to “encourage more intelligent and reasoned discussions,” and to foster the sharing of perspectives that reveal the thinking and policies of each party.

While commendable, the Chamber’s effort, limited to its membership and governed by its own rules and processes, does not fully address the vacuum it identifies. What’s urgently needed is a national political debate, streamed live and accessible to the entire country and diaspora, not just a select few.

The Chamber’s initiative nonetheless offers a moment to reflect on and improve our political culture — one too often dominated by “chicken and rum” politics, mass rallies, partisan press conferences, party-sponsored media, and community canvassing that preaches to the converted.

President Ross Gardner is right, even if not in these exact words: the current political climate, as reflected in party platforms and media appearances, is not built for dissecting, analysing, or debating pressing issues. It’s not designed to articulate policy proposals or critique opposing ideas.

Instead, it’s engineered to energise party bases through partisan rhetoric, pious, vote-getting narratives, and theatrical flair.

Extreme partisan rhetoric thrives in this

environment, leaving little room for nuance or reasoned counterpoints. Even press conferences, though more “professional”, often serve as safe spaces for friendly media to lob softball questions that officials effortlessly hit for six. These forums rarely yield detailed, evidence-based responses. More often, they become stages for blame games, deflection, and evasive answers delivered in choppy, curt fashion.

You’ve likely heard the familiar refrains: “When you were there,” “But you didn’t do it,” “Ask the government, not me,” “We’re not in charge of the purse; they are.” One side shirks responsibility; the other offers no substantive response, only blame for the polycrisis.

This is not the hallmark of a political system designed to interrogate, debate, and solve society’s recurring challenges. Parliament, unfortunately, mirrors these shortcomings — rife with blame, partisan diatribe, name-calling, and extremism that obscure the complexity of our national issues. Even the enforcement of Standing Orders and Points of Order rarely yields clarity for the public, often leaving more questions than answers.

Such dysfunction undermines democracy and citizen engagement, which require an informed electorate capable of making sound political decisions. Instead, supporters retreat to partisan media silos, each consuming their version of “truth.” But truth rarely resides in these echo chambers; it lives in the middle of the vacuum that political debates can help illuminate.

Without a national debate, voters remain ill-equipped to distinguish fact from fiction. While debates aren’t a cure-all for the problems plaguing our political discourse — rhetoric masquerading as policy, media bias, evasive answers — they offer a structured space for politicians to present and defend their ideas, backed by evidence and detail. They limit the scope for name-calling and elevate the conversation.

Debates empower citizens to make informed choices about their future. By watching politicians challenge each other’s proposals, voters can assess which

solutions best address the country’s needs. Yes, some politicians may misuse the platform, but ultimately, the people hold the power to decide.

Debates raise the standard of political discourse, fostering a culture of reasoned, evidence-based dialogue. Data from the Jamaica Debates Commission shows that citizens increasingly rely on debates to understand party priorities, stances and commitments. These forums help voters make more informed decisions, thanks to institutional safeguards, checks and balances, and the clarity they provide.

Debates also allow voters to read body language, interpret non-verbal cues, and evaluate responses to pointed questions and rebuttals. They offer a chance to connect with a candidate’s vision, or to spot evasiveness that may influence voting preferences.

Nuts and bolts of the political debate

We need not reinvent the wheel. The Jamaican model offers best practices we can adapt. Below are key considerations:

The Commission: An overarching, non-partisan commission must be established to plan and execute the debates. The Chamber of Commerce, given its credibility and legitimacy, should be a major component, ideally partnering with a coalition of civil society organisations to balance business and social interests.

The Moderator: Parties must agree on a non-partisan, independent moderator with no ties to any party, to ensure impartiality and public trust.

The Structure: Following Jamaica’s example, debates could be structured around: (I) Social Issues, (II) The Economy and Finance, (III) Governance, and (IV) a Leadership Debate. Parties would select representatives for the first three, while the leaders would debate each other on all issues in the fourth.

The Questions: Questions should be sourced from both Saint Lucian journalists and ordinary citizens via social media. This is critical for active citizen engagement, creating a rare opportunity to zone in on the feasibility of policy proposals beyond

manifesto launches.

Fact-Checking: A dedicated “fact-checker” should be pre-programmed with key party talking points from the last three terms, with answers provided by independent researchers. Inaccuracies and half-truths raised during the debate should be signalled in real-time and summarised for dissemination afterwards, ensuring citizens have accurate information.

If these considerations are followed and the political elite buy in, we can raise the level of political dialogue in this country. But politicians will only participate if the citizenry places a premium on debates as essential to their voting decisions. In Jamaica, data suggests a party’s boycott of a debate once played a critical role in its election loss.

If the public demands participation through numerical significance, making it a marker of political capital, politicians will have no choice but to comply. This requires public interest in elevating our body politic to issue-based, reasoned, and evidence-focused discussions.

It would also provide a distinct opportunity for active participation in a democratic polity that has too often alienated citizens, relegating them to window-dressing rather than treating them as active consumers. Ultimately, it would engender a culture of debate desperately needed to arrive at the well-thought-out ideas required for national development.

As our Nobel Laureate, Sir W. Arthur Lewis, effectively argued, politics is not about winners and losers, but about the consensus-building required for the art of development. This can only occur through debate, argumentation, and nuanced, evidence-based discussion.

The Jamaica Debates Commission has already shown us the way.

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