



# OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

by Rahym Augustin-Joseph

## Reflections on salary increases for Jamaican parliamentarians



In a previous opinion piece, in Saint Lucia, I discussed how certain political decisions by the political directorate were solely expressions of deeper crises confronting our countries, where elected officials capitalise on a political system which is out of tune with contemporary circumstances, lacks the necessary checks and balances, accountability, and justificatory approaches to decision-making.

Similarly, the recent decision by the Government of Jamaica, which saw the increase in salaries of parliamentarians and members of the executive by over 200 per cent according to various authoritative sources is a testament of the symptomatic expression. Without detailing the various increases in salaries, one just must look at the astronomical increase of over 232 per cent for the Minister of Finance, moving from \$7.4 million in 2021 to \$24.6 million. The Minister of Finance will however be receiving \$21.7 million effective April 1, 2023, which is about 140,000 USD. It therefore places the Jamaican parliamentarian's salary as one of the highest in the Caribbean as noted by a recent post by Kevz Politics. Similarly, other Cabinet Ministers have received a 230 per cent increase moving their salaries from \$6.9 million in 2021 to \$22.9 million next year and will currently take home an annual salary of \$20.2 million according to the Jamaica Gleaner and the Minister of Finance.

This astronomical increase may be out of tune with the socio-economic realities of the country, particularly where emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic, Jamaica, like many other Commonwealth Caribbean countries, faced significant economic contractions due to the adverse impact of the pandemic on travel, production, distribution, and the entertainment industry according to various authoritative reports.

Moreover, there continue to be troubling economic indicators such as the increased debt overhang with a soaring debt-to-GDP ratio, high unemployment rates because of the seasonal nature of employment and the inability of businesses to rebound post-pandemic. More particularly, international reports and estimates continue to place youth unemployment at 23.9 per cent. This is notwithstanding their control of inflation, no considerable disruption to foreign reserves among other economic indicators which shows signs of possible pre-pandemic levels of economic performance.

However, the impact of COVID-19 among other exogenous shocks has not disappeared with the declaration by the WHO that COVID-19 is no longer a global health emergency, in order to justify the astronomical salary increase. Some have argued that the \$1.7 billion which this will cost taxpayers could have been better utilised to eradicate the high levels of poverty, unemployment, inflation, infrastructural development, dealing with teacher migration issues, funding government projects and youth empowerment programmes.

More importantly, it seems to be antithetical to the wishes of the masses of the people, where politicians seek to increase their disposable income when a vast majority of their people are severely underpaid and overworked and face a plethora of socio-economic issues. Therefore, the 'timing' and the astronomical rate were problematic. The Government may have wanted to utilise a more reasonable increase mechanism over the next few years. Further, the inability to consult and justify through popular democracy suggests a lack of democratic validity. People of the Caribbean are therefore willing to accept decisions, but are unwilling to accept the indignity of being 'sacrificial lambs' particularly during dismal socio-economic circumstances.

Some have argued that the rationale is also problematic, as the Minister of Finance suggested that, "The increase is about attracting and retaining political leadership at all levels, tomorrow..." He opined that these salary increases would cause qualified and experienced individuals to be attracted to public life and that they would find it financially feasible to offer themselves to serve their country through the public service or the public directorate

By that logic, the minister should have also increased public servants salaries. These workers represent the citadel of the conceptualisation and implementation of day-to-day policy, particularly, where there are high levels of migration of skilled nationals. However, it seems the government has sacrificed the above, and wider public sector reform for salary increases as their only 'talent recruitment tool'. What about wider political education on the virtues of public service, payment based on performance, and youth empowerment programmes for public life, among other elements which can encourage individuals to be part of public life?

It is important to concede however that, there is a linear relationship between remuneration, performance and recruiting of skilled individuals and talent for respective positions. There is a view that it reduces corruption, money laundering among other financial infractions as politicians are not compelled to engage in financial infractions if they are compensated adequately. This is not to suggest that corrupt politicians will not find a loophole if they so desire. However, there needs to also be the tandem strengthening of the Integrity Commission, Public Accounts Committee, and Auditor General's office among other arms within the national integrity ecosystem to track and punish corruption.

Now, the reality of the post-colonial Caribbean is replete with stories which suggest that most of the parliamentarian's salary is not disposable income, as the myriad of requests, inter-generational poverty, and inundated social services system cause parliamentarians to provide personal income to constituents. As a matter of fact, Lisa Hanna has reminded us of the plethora of responsibilities of parliamentarians, "which go beyond what the public sees and they are the human resource directors for about 30 000 people and must make themselves available at all hours when people are frustrated and angry with the system's failures".

Hanna is correct, in noting that, "MPs are the buffers that absorb their anger, assist them personally and financially in buying food, medication, sending their children to school and burying their loved ones. They must secure funding for projects and ensure that the state apparatus operates efficiently. In some respects, the constituency office operates as an employment agency to help all individuals. It is a full-time job, with some days running up to 16 hours."

However, some will equally argue that there should instead be the funding of the public social services system and the removal of this upsurging possible syndrome of dependency on parliamentarians. This is not to suggest that there should be the post-colonial necessities, of giving a man a fish, even while teaching him how to fish. The reliance on one alone is intellectually bankrupt and unwise.

However, Plato's leadership criteria is instructive and a necessary guide for this conversation as remuneration should not be the sole 'recruitment tool' for public officials. As a matter of fact, Plato opines that public life should be unattractive

and not premised on self-aggrandisement so that only those fully committed to the challenges of leadership would offer themselves for office. Only those who are diligent, morally upright, hardest working and selfless must therefore be in public life. Moreover, the formula for good leadership was one who considers the interests of the whole state and places this above his own personal interest.

Implicit in Plato's formula lies the rejection of astronomical financial remuneration. If this is the guiding philosophy by which we govern our political affairs, we would remove the possible haste Plato has warned us about, where the state would be run by those always the most eager, as opposed to where the rulers are most reluctant.

The Government however seems to be putting the cart before the horse, as the announcement of the measures which will seek to enhance accountability should have been the foundation. These measures should also be present irrespective of the increase and should not be appended to it, as a marketing strategy. There should have already been the accountability reports by parliamentarians, job descriptions, special courses or training and publishing targets and policy goals during the budgetary process for the fiscal year and within wider public service reform. Now, some have argued that the increases still place parliamentarians below the market value within the private sector. While this may be true, the market in the private sector may also possess valuable lessons on accountability, key performance indicators, effectiveness and efficiency which should accompany any increase in salaries. However, there seems to be a discussion of increase devoid of these tenets of good governance.

However, there must be the utilisation of this iteration of Constitutional Reform to create transformative changes which enhance accountability as opposed to tinkering at the margins. There must be the introduction of the right of recall for parliamentarians, commensurate with the increase in salaries. The question must be whether a report to parliament with no accommodating sanctions is enough to justify a 200 per cent increase. Moreover, there must be the addressing of whether the myriad of responsibilities of the parliamentarian coupled with the ministerial responsibilities in our typology of Westminster, may be unfit for our contemporary realities. This has thwarted the legislature's ability to check the executive and ensure that ministerial duties are conducted appropriately. In a reimagining of our system, this increase in salaries would have therefore normally been accompanied by legislative scrutiny to ensure that the executive through policies and programmes remains answerable and accountable to the people through their elected officials.

In the end, CLR James always provokes thought, as he reminds us that whatever the policy or programme of the political party, when they enter government, they move from being answerable and representative of the people, to being oppressive to the masses of the people.

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