

OPINION & INSIGHTS

Some reasons why Saint Lucia stuck with Mr Pierre (Part 1)

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As the dust of the election settles, after Philip J. Pierre-led Saint Lucia Labour Party captured another supermajority in the December 1 polls, it is important not to let the moment pass without some reflections on some reasons why Saint Lucia may have stuck with Mr Pierre, as TC Brown did during his calypso earlier this year.

What is instructive, though, about TC Brown's song, among others in the season, is how they mirrored and emulated the voices of the people as seen in the election results. Not only were some of them supportive of the government, but many also challenged the opposition's political style, a rarity in politics.

After all, the political calypso is always anti-government in defence of the people. But, in this instance, one can argue that the "people" were satisfied with the government and echoed their anti-opposition stance continually. After all, calypso, as is said, reflects the voices of the people.

While some within Opposition quarters resorted to calling calypsonians political prostitutes, it may have been better to heed the quiet message of the kaiso tent, despite their belief that the performers were paid operatives of the Labour Party, and not truly reflective of the voices of the people. Maybe they were, maybe they were not, but that may have been irrelevant, recognising that the message was quite discerning.

However, hindsight clearly demonstrated the resonance and vindication of TC Brown, as he sang what, in summary, captured the rationale of the electorate in sticking with Mr Pierre. These articles will thus use TC Brown's lyrics to demonstrate why, as he did, Saint Lucia is stuck with Mr Pierre.

A referendum on leadership was on the ballot

He noted in effect in his opening lines, that "general elections is a clash of party leaders, whose main intention is to control the public coffers, our choice is clear on Election Day, is either Philip Pierre or Allen Chastanet."

TC Brown is thus accurate that this election was a referendum on the leadership of Saint Lucia. It is, however, no secret that the popularity, likability, success, vision, policy outlook, and ability to deliver of the leader of the political party and contender for prime minister, within Saint Lucia and Westminster, are important, if not the most important ingredients, for the success of any political party at an election. There are some cases, though, for which a grievance movement is sufficient, such that voters are more inclined to vote out a leader rather than vote one in.

In many instances, this has occurred in our body politic. In fact, sometimes there is extraordinarily little consideration given to the replacement, in circumstances where the people are "fed up". However, this may not be the case in this election based on the data, where the Labour Party increased its majority and vote share, and experienced a five-point positive swing, which is unheard of and is statistically significant for incumbent governments. Second-term swings are normally rare in the Caribbean. As Peter Wickham suggested, "It means that people have reposed confidence in the government after one term."

But, it is almost asinine and illogical for one to support a political party without supporting its leader at the polls, recognising how embedded and influential the political leader is within the party, such that they are seen as primes inter pares and power is carried over into their formal and informal duties within Westminster politics.

It should thus not surprise you that, even

in circumstances where citizens may not have been ambivalent to a particular candidate and may prefer them, they were unable to reconcile voting for that person because of their association with Allen Chastanet and his UWP.

It would be interesting to see the extent to which the rebuilding of the UWP will include these individuals, and whether they will remain as part of the body politic, or if the UWP will create anew.

In some instances, it may even be the case that some voted for Labour MPs because of their association with Mr Pierre. Furthermore, it may not have helped the case of the relative newness, inexperience, lack of community or national recognition of some of the options being proposed, in comparison to others who did better previously, as opposed to sitting MPs that individuals have experienced and are possibly satisfied with their performance over the past few years.

Some citizens could not have also seen Ministers and some representatives recognising the fusion of powers of the executive and legislature of our country. The failure to present a shadow cabinet, as noted by Dr Adrian Augier, may have heightened that sentiment, even if one could see who could fit within which Ministry, but there was a concentration of policy discussions among a select few. And even in circumstances where they could, it appears that association with Allen Chastanet may have caused them to receive a vote of no confidence.

Notwithstanding this argument, I believe that citizens went to the ballot boxes asking themselves several questions, which include but are not limited to:

1. Which leader's values, beliefs and traits do I associate and believe in more? Who is more caring, humble, honourable, graceful, empathetic, truthful, trustworthy, inspiring, loving, stable, culturally and nationally grounded and on the other hand, divisive, antagonist, destructive, foreign, et cetera?
2. Who do I trust more and believe is a better manager of the economy, in how I think an economy should be run, and it should work for the benefit of the citizens?
3. Who do I think has a genuine social conscience and love for the people's well-being?
4. Who do I believe puts the interests of the many, not the few, first, and always?
5. Who do I believe cares more about my interests and those of my family?
6. Who do I believe has performed more, recognising that I have experienced both leaders in the past?
7. Who do I feel is a better unifier as opposed to a divider?
8. Why is everyone gravitating to one leader and running away from the other?
9. Which leader do I believe sees me, feels me, understands me and has emerged from my circumstances more?

Perhaps it is because, in the aggregate, people answered these questions in the affirmative for Prime Minister Philip Pierre that he was able to regain the seat of power.

TC Brown therefore provides a possible comparison of how the electorate viewed their choices, when he said, "Allen is no John Compton, he is just a rich man son, that Flambeau put in charge because his coffers large, Pierre come from roots, he start wear the government boots and his teacher mommy taught him to serve with humility.

Awa, Allen ou cah en lapen, my choice is clear, I sticking with Mr Pierre."

Dr Anderson Reynolds is also instructive when he said, "Chastanet and Guy Joseph remaining in the UWP leadership is holding the party back, and that in the foreseeable future and in the past, Saint Lucians were unexcited about this political duo. And notwithstanding, the UWP were able to attract a few candidates who fit the educated and electable criteria, the population is unlikely to rally around them if they are operating under the banner and hegemony of Allen Chastanet and Guy Joseph."

He posits that on the other end that "Pierre has significant likability, especially since he has been seen as an unlikely Prime Minister, and some of the negatives they have thrown at him, such as speech pattern, have endeared him to people, seen as an underdog, and he does get the best out of people."

Further, unlike the UWP in its current conception, Prime Minister Pierre benefited from the ministers under the Anthony Administration, which made his political job quite easier and manageable.

But the concept of leadership being on the ballot was also recognised by the political parties in how they attempted to display their leaders.

On one hand, Allen Chastanet was portrayed, per the manifesto and their campaign, as the "supreme messiah" leader who was a visionary, religious and family-oriented man, and that people were duped by propaganda to have voted him out, and he should be returned to the rightful heir of the throne, i.e., the Office of the Prime Minister. He was portrayed as the one who would right the wrongs of the Labour Party and, by extension, the electorate and recommence many of the visionary infrastructural projects – such as St Jude Hospital, DSH, the Airport, and the port – that were allegedly suspended by this administration.

The central tenet suggested that the country was better in 2019, pre-pandemic, than in 2021–2025, as evidenced by issues such as "cost of living crisis, escalating crime and violence, state of healthcare and allegations of corruption". However, central to the solution to these issues was Allen Chastanet, as shown through the branding as a "natural better manager of the economy because of his business acumen" and his ability to assemble a mammoth team to assist him with the heavy weight of governance.

However, the chairman was instructive when he suggested they had assembled a team that could work with Chastanet, suggesting again the classic part of Westminster politics practised in the Caribbean that elevates the centrality of the leader.

But what was interesting was that Chastanet never leaned into his successes in managing COVID-19 as a statement of leadership. Instead, pre-2020 was being referenced as a statement of success and vision. In fact, Chastanet suggested indirectly that his work was cut short by the pandemic, and he should be given another opportunity.

However, this also seemed counterintuitive as the pandemic was used as a proverbial crutch, as if leadership is confined to times of prosperity alone and not shaped and shown in the crucible of tough times. In much the same way that the UWP has critiqued the Prime Minister regarding his pronouncements on crime and violence and cost-of-living issues – a valid concern and view.

In trying to draw a distinction, though, between Chastanet and Pierre, Pierre was painted by the UWP as weak, indecisive,

breeding a dependency on government, lacking vision and direction, and occasionally mocked for his stammering. In fact, they also always tried to tie the prime minister to his constituency and what they viewed as a lack of performance, almost suggesting that the people have been "wrong" for continually electing the prime minister.

In part two, I will comment on how demonising social protection continues to be an ideological sin of the UWP and a fatal campaign error for an opposition that picked the wrong components of the social protection agenda to respond to.

On the other end of the spectrum, the SLP attempted to paint Pierre as a loving, caring, rooted, humble and honest politician who genuinely cared about the ordinary struggles of the people and was committed to making interventions to improve livelihoods. The Labour Party thus always pointed to the minimum wage, education, social protection, record years of economic growth, and the youth economy, among other areas. In fact, the party prided itself on releasing a book of achievements to highlight why it needed a second term. It asked the citizens to judge him by his performance. As shown in the manifesto, though, they sought to paint him as a leader, but with a "team" as seen on the front page.

In contrast, the SLP portrayed Chastanet as destructive, divisive, inconsistent on policy positions, hypocritical, disrespectful, entitled and arrogant, and said he was unable to deliver on any of the projects he keeps talking about during his tenure.

The SLP continued to remind Saint Lucia of past statements of Chastanet, which he never walked back, showing his disdain and disrespect for the people of Saint Lucia. In defence, his supporters argued that some remarks were satirical and he was often misquoted. In others, the statements were "true" and that Chastanet was bold to identify some of the ills of our society, while other politicians cower.

But, even on the question of economic management and performance, TC Brown poured cold water on the visionary notion articulated by the UWP in his own attempt to differentiate between Chastanet and Pierre as many voters did and asked, "Where the dolphin park is, the racetrack, all the pipe dreams and elusive schemes, but Pierre free up ganga, minimum wage delivered and we looking good to deliver St Jude."

At times, they even painted Chastanet as anti-Saint Lucian because of his inability to connect with certain elements of the nation's culture, for example, Creole. It was the SLP attempting to make the point that leadership must appear from the cultural specificity of one's locale.

On the other hand, the UWP's constant pushback was the irrelevance of cultural components as being important to leadership, and the notion that Chastanet was to be supported whether he was pink, orange, white, black or blue, if these were even colour shades, and that people support him because of his visionary leadership and not other isms.

Over time, Chastanet, addressing these issues, suggested that he could not control the circumstances of his birth, but that he could control how he utilised his origins for the benefit of the wider society. The SLP, even if not directly, focused on Chastanet's class as a hindrance to serving ordinary people, while tying this theory to practical examples during his term, because they became fully aware that social rank isn't always a barrier to people-centred representation, but class suicide is the main problem.