

RENEWING THE PNP AROUND IDEAS RATHER THAN PERSONALITIES

BACKGROUND

This presentation represents a fusion of two discussion papers prepared by Mark Golding and myself respectively, shared with a small group of comrades, and refined by their feedback. The group included members of the NWU, the PNP Y.O., the Patriots, as well as professionals, academics, and businesspersons.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of political events such as the election loss of February 25th, a political party can either continue to embrace the status quo, or it can feel compelled to renew.

The proponents of the status quo will take consolation in the fact that the Parliament is delicately balanced at 32/31 – the strongest possible Opposition. The advocates for renewal, on the other hand, will be concerned that the eleven seats lost in 2016 represent the second highest number of seats lost by the PNP in a general election in 36 years. This occurred despite the 2012-2016 PNP government arguably having the strongest performance of any administration in decades. For example:

- Infrastructure: completed the North/South Highway, and the arrangements for the Port of Kingston to be transformed to take advantage of the expanded Panama Canal
- Economy:
 - Passed 11 IMF tests
 - Achieved the lowest inflation in decades
 - Increased employment
 - Achieved relative stability of the currency (after re-setting its value to achieve global competitiveness)
 - Business and Consumer confidence at its highest ever
- Crime: The number of murders were reduced by 1,300 during our four year term compared with the previous administration, and every single category of serious and violent crime was down by 20-60% in the months leading up to the election
- Legislation: perhaps best performance since Norman Manley's 1950s administration

With so many positives, how could we have lost 11 seats?

As a young MP in 1993, I grumbled to Michael Manley about a community that told me “All we need in your first term is piped water” and then didn’t even bother to say thanks when they received the piped water but instead started to lament the condition of the road. Cde Manley laughed “Young man, you have just been introduced to the cycle of rising expectations.” Perhaps as a Party we are being reminded of this phenomenon. We cannot rest on even recent achievements but must constantly project a message of hope and optimism for the future.

I will now outline two sets of ideas for renewal. The first set has to do with the Party’s structure and operations, while the second set has to do with economic and social policies.

IDEAS FOR RENEWAL: PARTY STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS

The People’s National Party is more than just a political party; it is an emancipatory social movement. Its core values must provide direction to its policies and programmes and govern all its operations, whether internal to the Party or as an administration whenever it forms the government. So before turning directly to the ideas for renewal of the Party Structure and Operations, it is important to reaffirm these core values. At a minimum, these values must include:

- **Integrity** – the Party, its Officers, and elected representatives must always demonstrate honesty and strong moral principles.
- **Egalitarianism** – all people are equal in fundamental worth and social status, and are to be accorded respect.
- **Accountability** – the Party and its leaders have an obligation to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner.
- **Participatory democracy** – broad participation of Party members/citizens in political decisions and policies is a key organizational principle. The Party must maintain an intellectually open environment and accommodate self-criticism.
- **Self-reliance** – the development of a spirit of individual and collective capacity and responsibility to manage one’s own affairs. Michael Manley used this term to involve a transformation of consciousness

to create a confident identity, and as a direct antidote to the dependency created by our colonial past.

Now I will turn to three specific ideas for renewing the Party's Structure and Operations.

1. Renewal and Re-purposing of Groups

The Party Group is the channel through which 99% of members join the Party. It was established as a vehicle to disseminate information, give feedback to leadership, and raise the socio-political awareness of the party members. The context then was a Jamaica with no electronic media and a largely illiterate population. That context no longer prevails, and for decades there have been public complaints that many groups exist largely on paper. There is a parallel complaint that many older party members have nothing to show for their long and faithful service to the Party.

Therefore, a more relevant role for today's party group is as an incubator for human development. A prerequisite for full group membership should involve participation in training workshops in leadership, personal development, financial literacy, the Party's philosophy and Constitution, and political organization. The life skills of our party members will be improved, with emphasis placed on job readiness and entrepreneurship training to empower our membership. Group meetings would become continuing education seminars to reinforce a culture of learning and create (or report progress on) social, economic, or political projects.

The Party Group would develop leadership candidates for other community organizations with which the Party must engage to forge the broad coalition necessary to maintain a national movement - e.g. PTAs, Citizens Associations, JAS groups, etc.

2. Systematic Renewal of Leadership

The Constitution of the PNP provides annual opportunities for reaffirming or replacing officers through re-election. In practice, however, any attempt to exercise this democracy is unwelcome. There has not been a single national officer position contested in the last eight years. This cannot be healthy for a democratic party.

Therefore, we should consider amending the Party's Constitution so that all office holders would have circumscribed tenure. Tenure could be limited

by having either a mandatory retirement age, or a limit of how long one can hold a post, or some combination of the two.

It is interesting that just this month Cuban President Raul Castro proposed an age limit of 70 for those wishing to lead the Cuban Communist Party. He said the limit was required for the “systematic rejuvenation of the entire system of party posts.” China has a mandatory retirement age of 68 and all top party officials are limited to two 5-year terms in the same post. In Brazil, the mandatory retirement age is 70. In many other countries such as the USA, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Haiti there are limits of one or two terms as President. Locally, the JLP has proposed term limits for a Prime Minister.

The thinking behind these mechanisms to circumscribe tenure is that Leaders as a class should never be trusted uncritically. Cliques exist in all parties and lead to favouritism, nepotism and other unwholesome practices. Therefore, reasonable limits must be imposed on the duration of individual leadership.

3. Communication and Citizen Engagement

The Appraisal Committee chaired by Julian Robinson will soon be issuing its report. However, we do not have to await that report to recognize obvious weaknesses, specifically in the area of Communications. The Party’s approach has been dated and out of sync with the average voter. This was reflected in our decision not to debate in the recent elections, and in our inability to respond effectively to the “\$18,000 per month” tax promise.

The PNP has traditionally recognized that participatory democracy requires more than periodic participation in internal or national elections. The Community Councils of the 1970s represented a genuine attempt at citizen engagement. More recently, we have used town hall meetings, styled as “Face to Face” or “Live and Direct”, as sporadic methods of engagement. But while technology has advanced new ways of engaging the public, we have unfortunately been perceived as being at odds with the so-called “articulate minority”. Cde. P. J. Patterson reminded us recently that the articulate minority of 1938 formed the PNP, and so we must maintain that historical connection.

The Party must develop communication machinery that facilitates contributions by its members, supporters and other citizens to our policy conversations and decision-making, as full participants on a continual basis. Wide access to the Internet and social media provides platforms for the

Party to create new avenues for citizen engagement, such as Virtual Community Councils, Online Town Hall meetings, etc. The Party must reorganize the Secretariat to reflect Communication and Information Management as a core competence and responsibility going forward.

IDEAS FOR RENEWAL: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY

Bernie Sanders, the Independent US Senator who is seeking to become the Presidential nominee on the Democratic ticket, has legitimized democratic socialism in a way that few could have anticipated, and it is certainly appropriate for the PNP to re-examine this philosophy. In fact, the Party has periodically re-asserted democratic socialist principles, whether or not we have used the term to describe them. For example:

- Reaffirmation of the Jamaican Model of Democratic Socialism in the 1970s
- The Party document entitled the Compass (1990) explained the PNP shift to “market” socialism
- The Party documents entitled the 21st Century Mission (2000) and the Progressive Agenda (2010) each reaffirmed the core ideals of social justice of the Party, though without express reference to democratic socialism.

The use of the term ‘Democratic Socialism’ is, in my view, primarily a pragmatic consideration. What a renewed Peoples National Party calls itself is less important than the policies and programmes it develops, promotes and implements.

Since the start of the 1990s the PNP has deliberately taken an approach that toned down its earlier ideological rhetoric, and has adopted a more fiscally sustainable approach to governance. Accordingly, the strategies to guarantee social justice for the broad mass of the people have been fashioned within the limits of those constraints. This approach was a necessary correction, based on lessons learned from the 1970s.

Recent electoral experience suggests that a re-balancing may now be necessary. That re-balancing has to be carefully approached given the continuing fiscal fragility. Populism and social justice principles should not be confused. Populism promotes an unsustainable freeness mentality that

results in a reduction in the quality of service, be it in healthcare or education. Equality of opportunity means that resources are targeted where they are most needed.

The challenge – How do we translate our political philosophy into actual policies and programmes that are both derived from and consistent with social justice principles, and are also viable in the sense of being compatible with sound and immutable principles of economics?

In that regard, creative imagination must be applied to move us in the direction of desired socio-economic change. Otherwise, we will be perceived as elevating adherence to IMF prescriptions to a virtue, or merely yielding to powerful vested interests. The PNP must continue to create the social institutions and programmes capable of meeting the challenges facing the nation. The establishment of the NHT in the 70s to respond to the chronic housing shortage is an excellent example of one such creative and enduring social institution.

In this era, we must identify and commit to a clutch of progressive policies that focus on transforming societal relations towards greater equality of opportunity and social justice for all, and that are sustainable. Some possible examples may be:

1. **Promote ownership:**

- a. Regularizing marginalized communities on captured land to achieve tenured land ownership supported by basic infrastructure. Lessons from past errors in execution (e.g. Operation Pride) must be learned, and applied. These efforts must be supported by significantly strengthening the LAMP programme, to accelerate the titling of unregistered land.
- b. Promote share ownership by creating incentives for companies to list on the stock exchange and especially to democratize share ownership. Central to this effort would be Employee Share Ownership Plans, less burdened by complex rules designed to protect the Revenue and made easier to implement.
- c. Expand financing and technical assistance to MSMEs.

2. **Broaden access to finance for tertiary education**, so that no youngster with the intellectual ability to pursue further study in Jamaica is deprived of that life-changing opportunity by reason of lack of

resources. In principle, the market risk of achieving employment should be borne by the State rather than the student. This means that student loan repayments should be linked to future employment earnings, and should not exceed a manageable percentage of the student's future income as it is earned.

3. **Recognize that the Jamaican language is the first language for most** of our people. We must therefore adopt an approach to early childhood and primary education that does not place children who are speakers of Jamaican at a disadvantage. Failure to recognize the place of the Jamaican language in our society is based in colonial-era discriminatory biases, and is fundamentally unjust to children from homes where Jamaican is the spoken language. This issue also affects our justice system - we should implement rules of court requiring judges to identify whether witnesses and jurors are proficient in Jamaican or English, and to take steps to ensure that questions are framed in the language they understand and that answers are accurately recorded in that language so that their testimony is not corrupted in translation.

4. **Decentralize Government Authority**

The PNP should embrace the principle of organization and resource deployment that empowers individuals and communities at the local level. Communities ought to control whatever they can do for themselves, without being shackled by excessive bureaucratic control from higher authority.

The public cleansing function (street sweeping and garbage collection) can illustrate how this principle could be applied. It is neither necessary nor desirable to have a central authority – the NSWMA – arranging street sweeping and garbage collection in Mandeville, for example, when there is a local authority – the Manchester Parish Council – that is competent to perform this task. A smaller NSWMA could focus instead on managing the regional landfills and providing regulatory functions.

CONCLUSION

The recent election defeat provides an opportunity for rebuilding and renewal of the Party. That opportunity should be approached with a view to a radical overhaul of what exists, rather than “mere tinkering” that

essentially preserves the status quo in an era that is leaving us behind. The beneficiaries of the status quo are very clear on what they have to lose from rebuilding and renewal, while the potential beneficiaries of a new paradigm may not even identify themselves as such at this time. Therefore, the effort will be risky and the outcome uncertain. In this regard, I will close by reciting some wise words of Gabriel Kolko:

"We can never know in advance the ultimate results of our behaviour in a world in which political forces and actors are inherently unstable, often in complex ways that they themselves fail to comprehend. If we were to require an absolute guarantee regarding the outcome of our conduct, we would always remain passive, and the negative functional and moral results of our inertia would be far greater."

Thank you for listening to these ideas to renew the Party's policies and operations which will hopefully stimulate more discussion.