

The Caribbean has been falling ever lower on Europe's radar for years; governments have run out of energy, ideas

By David Jessop

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In recent weeks my friend and colleague, Sir Ronald Sanders, has written more than once about what he and others regard as the failure so far of Caribbean politicians to defend strenuously the economic interests of industries like rum, sugar and bananas in the face of European offers of trade liberalisation to Andean and Central American nations. In doing so, he seemed to point to a more general malaise: that the Caribbean's global profile is diminishing and the region's political class as a whole has somehow lost the will or focus to fight for what is right.



^[1]For years now, the Caribbean has been falling ever lower on Europe's radar. There are few EU member states with a genuine interest in the region, and even nations like the United Kingdom that remain a friend, have ceased to take a detailed interest in issues other than security, climate change and migration. For their part senior European officials and trade negotiators with little or no experience of the region or understanding of Europe's colonial history, see the region as marginal or difficult to deal with, while key institutions like the European Parliament, that have the capacity to change policy, rarely debate Caribbean issues or see any political figure from the region.

The consequence is that the Caribbean, by failing to demonstrate the will to challenge politically or directly question EU decisions that impact negatively, is enabling Europe to ignore it politically and allowing the European Commission to dictate the pace of change and determine its future. Why Caribbean political disengagement has happened is far from clear.

At one level the withdrawal from the international scene seems to reflect a diminution in financial resources as a consequence of the global economic downturn and an understandable desire to spend more time managing domestic issues. At another, it is hard to identify any foreign trade minister with the strategic and tactical understanding of how trade negotiations actually work or with enough interest to be willing to absorb the often complex detail. And while there are hardworking officials within Caricom dealing with trade issues and in the Office of Trade Negotiations who fully understand the implications, the present maze of regional competences and meetings means they can only go where the political leadership directs.

More generally, there is a sense that governments have run out of energy and ideas. Whether this is because of the failure of the integration process to move on, the belief that in an economic crisis it is every nation for itself, or because of an absence of vision, leadership and strategic thinking, or all these factors, is unclear.

What may now be required is a new political narrative that enables the Caribbean to develop and present a vision of itself and its future that not only it can believe in, but others outside can understand.

The region, with the exception of Haiti, is not poor. Nations manage, even though the statistics suggest that the situation should be otherwise. There is a strong case for commodity and services industries to exist side by side. Profit is good as long as it contributes to the social good. Well delivered and executed development assistance is vital if the economic promise the region previously showed is to be realised. Both older and newer industries need to be rationalised and made viable. The private and public sectors, despite their mutual suspicion, have to coexist if economic development is to take place. Nations like the Dominican Republic have an important regional role to play. The public good is the greater good.

These are examples of simple demonstrable messages, not based on the past, but on a desire to reach the future. Whatever this message, it is for the Caribbean alone to know and shape, but there is a desperate need for the region to demonstrate that it has a strategy, stand up politically for its interests and explain clearly where it is going.

This is not just important for Europe and North America, given the close economic ties the region has, but is just as significant to newer partners such as Brazil, China or India that also want a modern, thoughtful, financially viable partner they can respect.

One good external starting point for developing a strong new message in a European context would be at the European Parliament, which under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty is now a full partner in decision-making in many of the areas that most concern the Caribbean, including trade. Its committees, its rapporteurs and its political parties ought to be engaged politically by Caribbean ministers, as without them debates such as one that will occur very soon on trade policy towards Latin America will not be qualified by any voice expressing concerns on behalf of the Caribbean.

Another political opportunity to do so could be the EU-Latin American and Caribbean summit that will take place next month in Madrid. Although Europe is trying to ensure that the level of debate is restricted to generalities and matters of political principle, the prior EU Cariforum summit and preparatory meetings for both, offers opportunities for the Caribbean politically and to develop personal relationships within an EU of twenty-seven states.

Time is passing. The West Indian Commission under the leadership of Sir Shridath Ramphal recognised in 1993 what was happening to the world, and the need for the Caribbean to adapt and better present itself to the world. It failed to do so.

The problems now being faced in Europe indicate that the Caribbean needs politically to defend its interests not because of the past, but because it needs a future.

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