

## NOT INVITED TO THE TEA PARTY

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Former prime minister of St Vincent James Mitchell has opined that it would be better for the Caribbean if the Conservative Party won the upcoming general elections in the United Kingdom.

It is surprising that a man who knew so much about British politics that he could have himself knighted should venture such a patently wrong view. The Caricom states, all former colonies, cherish the illusion of a "special relationship", albeit neo-colonial, with Great Britain.

The fact is that Caricom has slipped slowly but steadily off the foreign policy agenda of both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

There are several popular but specious explanations for this state of affairs. One view suggests that the region consists of countries that have "mastered" the art of the Westminster model of democratic governance. This is not plausible since Britain has valued relations with several countries whose governance is not all that the Westminster model aspires to.

Another argument is that the UK does not see the need to help Caricom because, with the embarrassing exception of a few countries like Guyana and Jamaica, they are middle to high-income developing economies. Most heads of government in Caricom would vigorously oppose being weaned from British succour because "we small, we vulnerable".

Still others proffer the lack of minerals and little strategic geopolitical value in the post-Cold War era. The Caribbean is no longer in the scaled-down British sphere of influence but is in the proverbial "US backyard". Clearly this reasoning is not valid, given the extent to which China, Taiwan and Venezuela are wooing governments in the region, and the hubristic pride of succeeding British governments in protecting their interests in the barren little atolls of the Falkland Islands.

Caricom has concentrated its relations with the UK on soliciting aid. Many people in the region view British aid as partial repayment for slavery and the extracted profits of the "Triangular Trade". This is a ploy for permanent dependence on aid handouts as compensation for the loss of preferential treatment for sugar and bananas. The updated version of this transparent mendicancy is the impact of climate change on small island developing states.

The British, like every other forward-looking developed country, are sick and tired of the "we need" mantra which Caricom has been chanting for the last half-a-century. Like a stuck record it only evokes annoyance and exasperation. What is needed is a "work song": we know where we are going and we are helping ourselves to get there. People are always more willing to help those who are seen to be helping themselves and not just saying so.

Caricom has no entitlement to be on the foreign policy agenda of the British Government of whichever political party. A group of small, democratic, middle-income states has to get itself on the agenda other than by earthquake or hurricane. This means first, crafting an engaging agenda and second, convincingly articulating that agenda.

A self-propelled development strategy designed for an era of economic globalisation and multi-polar international diplomacy needs to be skilfully articulated. Engagement starts with a coterie of energetic high commissioners, but Caricom no longer gives the Court of St James the importance that it deserves. Indeed, the region has not had effective diplomatic representation in London since Derick Heaven and Sir Ronald Sanders. Caricom cannot reap what it did not sow and it cannot sow without seed and sowers.