

## A LITTLE GRATITUDE TO CUBA

by Peter Lansiquot

As I write, several hundred Saint Lucian students have graduated from various centers of higher education in Cuba. As is to be expected, those students had varying experiences during their sojourns in that sister Caribbean country. I belong to the category of pioneers of the early 1980s that paved the way for those who would follow.

The early seventies were extremely difficult years for young graduates from the smattering of secondary schools that existed in Saint Lucia at the time. As late as 1979, when I graduated from the SDA Academy, the only secondary schools in Saint Lucia were the Saint Mary's College, Saint Joseph's Convent, Castries Comprehensive Secondary School, Vieux Fort Senior Secondary School, and the Academy. Only five secondary schools and thousands of needy primary school graduates as recently as 1979 in Saint Lucia!

At that time, the only higher level educational institutions were the Saint Lucia 'A' Level College, the Morne Fortune Technical College and the Teachers Training College. These would later become the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College. At the time, although the strict academic requirement for entry into university studies were passes in at least five subjects at 'O' level, most graduates were unable to enroll at universities because their parents were simply too poor to afford them the required financing. In the interim, some of the graduates who had acquired passes in five 'O' Levels or more, would enroll at the 'A' Level College, where they would attain the higher preparatory training for entry into university studies. After two years at the 'A' Level College, those two students who achieved the best results in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'A' Level examinations administered by the University of Cambridge and the University of London would qualify for the kind consideration of the government of the day to obtain Island Scholarships for the pursuance of a university degree.

One can well imagine the heartache that so many poor students suffered as a result of this paucity of opportunities for them to enter a university. I was one of those many students. In 1979, the regular, poor 'A' Level graduate had no choice but to seek some form of employment, and save tirelessly with a view to paying his/her way at university some years down the line. Those were the rough times and circumstances that forged the temperaments and overall human condition of the relatively solid block of university graduates that Saint Lucia had acquired as the nation emerged into the early sixties, seventies and eighties.

Many university graduates who came after that period, particularly in the nineties, had relatively easier times and circumstances. For one thing, the island had developed apace, and many families enjoyed greater levels of savings and disposable incomes, compared to the situation of Saint Lucian families in general in the fifties, sixties and seventies. Saint Lucia is a very young country and economy. Numerous Saint Lucian families were dismally poor in only recent years. Many continue to be very poor. It should be remembered in this context that we are largely the descendants of people who worked for more than 400 years beneath the yoke of colonial slave exploitation for no pay!

University graduates in Saint Lucia were relatively sparse by the end of the decade of the seventies. Then came the biggest single event that has positively affected the growth of the

number of Saint Lucian university graduates resident on the island: The Cuba - Saint Lucia Scholarship Programme. Suddenly, 'A' Level graduates and other qualified graduates, who would mostly have been *scruntin*g for a scholarship, like I was after graduating from the 'A' Level College in 1981, found that they could qualify for university and other scholarships in Cuba, thanks to the internationalist generosity of the revolutionary government of President Fidel Castro. The anti-communist and Anti-Castro propagandists went to work immediately, generously informing us that there was no guarantee that we would be able to return to Saint Lucia upon graduation, as the communist government might consider our education to be State property on graduation. They talked all sorts of nonsense, and even the late Prime Minister, Dame Eugenia Charles of Dominica, a rabid anti-communist, pretending to be fooled, initially prevented hundreds of scholarship-hungry Dominican students from accepting the Cuban offer. Later, Mr. John Compton, who again became Saint Lucia's Prime Minister in 1982, followed Eugenia's foolish example, if only for a while.

Today, hundreds of Dominicans and Saint Lucians, among thousands of graduates of other nationalities, including tens of thousands of Africans, have left Cuba's numerous universities and returned to their countries, where they have incorporated themselves into their national productivity equations. The lies about communist indoctrination turned out to be just that: lies!

During my years in Cuba, it was evident that there were many thousands of students, in fact the large majority of students there, who had no interest in communism as an alternative path of development for their countries. Empathy with communism had never been a stipulation of the government of Cuba. The Cuban educational authorities never manifested any interest in brainwashing anyone. Marxist Leninist Philosophy was a subject that was taught in Cuban universities, just like it is taught in many universities in the USA, UK, France, Germany, Australia, Canada, and other developed and developing countries. Obviously the difference was that one was reading Marxism Leninism in an environment that subscribed to that philosophy in its system of production relations, national governmental administration and in the larger society. That was the only difference. New and immature entrants into Cuban universities, including most of the Saint Lucian students, thought that it was a big deal to have to study Marxist Leninist philosophy, until they got to realize that the same subject was being taught in the major capitalist universities.

The nature of the Cuban educational system and national governmental political philosophy that made Marxist Leninist studies compulsory, tended to offend many students, and unfortunately, in spite of the interesting and thought provoking subject matter that constitutes Marxist Leninist philosophy, many students continued to have an aversion to the subject, a consequence of a puerile syndrome of immaturity and misguided pretensions to an abhorrence of socialism and socialist theory and practice. For my part, I opened my mind to the subject, in much the same way that I had opened my mind to the study of other philosophies, and I thoroughly enjoyed my classes in Marxism Leninism. Today, after 6 years of studies in Cuba, and 19 more years of a positive relationship with top Cuban government officials and other ordinary Cuban citizens, I am yet to become a communist; so that the threat of being brainwashed by the Cuban educational system when we were leaving Saint Lucia's shores for Havana in 1982 was all hogwash!

Thanks to the internationalist generosity of President Fidel Castro's socialist government, hundreds of new university graduates have entered the productive sphere of the Saint Lucia national economy, at a rate that would not have been possible if the conditions of the nineteen seventies had persisted. In return for their generosity the Cubans have only asked graduates to

understand their chosen path of development and to respect their right to pursue their chosen path. In more recent years, the Cuban government has also extended a hand to Saint Lucia's development by providing gratis and specialized medical attention to over ten thousand Saint Lucians to date, under the Miracle Eye Project. No Cuban official has asked any one of those patients to consider becoming a communist, socialist, or even to read socialist philosophy. The least that Saint Lucians can do however is to demonstrate, directly or indirectly, a basic human solidarity with a country and a government that has been and continues to be so generous to our people.

Recently a former Saint Lucian scholarship holder and graduate from a university in Cuba, responded as follows to an e-mail message that she had received from the Embassy of Cuba here: "Please do not send these e-mails or paper mail to me concerning the revolution, communism or anything derogatory about the USA. Your purpose here in St. Lucia is not to inform St. Lucians about your revolution or encourage communism but to encourage and enhance the St. Lucian - Cuban relationship. I am not the only past student who is tired of receiving these e-mails and I speak on behalf of everyone. If you continue sending me mail I will report it to my Foreign Affairs Dept. This is unbecoming of an embassy in a foreign land."

It is clear that this person has a very big axe to grind. I spent six years studying in Cuba, really scrunting, really hustling. I was unquestionably one of the poorest Saint Lucian students in Cuba. Although my dearly beloved sister, Joan Lansiquot, and my mom, the late Eliza Lansiquot, tried to help as they could, I still went through very tough times, tougher than what was experienced by any other Saint Lucian student in Cuba at the time. I made it through university there with tremendous help from my Cuban comrades and the Cuban authorities. What little they had, they shared with me. When a Cuban had a cup of coffee, he shared it with love. When he had one cigarette, he shared it with love. When he had one egg, he shared it with love. When he had one tortilla, he broke it in two with love. During my six years there, no Cuban ever spoke to me about socialism or communism. If the Cubans did not ask us to be communists while we studied over there among them, would they now be coming to Saint Lucia to seek our holy conversion after we have now settled into our comfortable, lucrative jobs, as is certainly the case of the axe grinder?

Obviously, the axe grinder has a right to request that the Embassy desist from sending her e-mail. What is interesting though is the mindset that would have a former beneficiary of Cuba's great generosity, to take such umbrage at the e-mail received, that she had to spit out her displeasure to the Cuban Ambassador in such a disrespectful manner, and even go as far as threaten to complain to Saint Lucia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs if the Embassy's e-mail persisted. That same individual though, I am certain, receives junk mail and spam like all the rest of us, from all over the world, and simply deletes the same. However, when what she considers to be junk mail has originated from the Cuban embassy, she has to resort to hostility and unfriendliness. And, to add insult to injury, she has the gall to proclaim herself local ambassador of all disgruntled graduates from Cuba, speaking on behalf of everyone!

This graduate, whoever she is, obviously had some unpleasant experiences in Cuba. She reminds me of that category of student who thought mistakenly that there was something so diabolical about the reading of Marxist Leninist philosophy in Cuban universities. She reminds me of those who believe that student life in Cuba is so much more difficult than student life in the rest of the world. She reminds me of several Saint Lucian students in Cuba, who had obviously been spoilt and pampered brats at home, and who caused the general body of poorer students much embarrassment at various Cuban universities. There are many examples of such

mommy's boys and girls who failed to decently settle down in Cuba, and face the music of studying abroad, away from their dotting mommies and daddies! If only some of us knew what the deceased son-of-the-soil, educator and political agitator George Odlum, had to endure while he studied at Oxford University in England! If only she knew how the now world-renowned Rick Wayne struggled to make it out there and return to Saint Lucia to make his contribution. If only she knew how Saint Lucians have hustled and *scrunted* at universities around the world! If only she knew how many Saint Lucian graduates are presently heavily burdened with loan payments to so many banks, as a result of their university studies in foreign countries! Is she now paying a loan as a result of her university studies in Cuba? I doubt it.

Our older folks used to teach us not to bite the hands that have fed us. I take this opportunity as a graduate from a Cuban university, to send a call out to all who have graduated from that sister Caribbean country, that notwithstanding the political philosophy one may subscribe to, never to forget the philosophy of gratitude our forefathers handed down to us. You don't have to be a communist; you don't have to be a socialist; you can be a capitalist if you choose to; you can be anti-communist if you so decide, but it is absolutely more dignified to simply delete what you classify as spam and junk mail from whoever sends it, than to bark out with vicious ferocity and bite the hand that has fed and educated you. Take this little bit of wisdom, my younger brothers and sisters, coming from the mind of a Cuba - Saint Lucia Scholarship Program pioneer.