

Gov't making good enviro ground

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Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world. — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Defining the boundaries of the Cockpit Country is a decision and achievement of monumental importance. The Andrew Holness-led Administration deserves full credit for its sound rejection of those who would have preferred that we risk doing great damage to the womb of potable water in western Jamaica.

It is important to emphasise that the Cockpit Country is an area of outstanding ecological and cultural significance located in the north-west of Jamaica. It is an island within an island and contains specially adapted plants and animals found nowhere else in the world.

Moreover, the biodiversity of the Cockpit Country is of global significance. It is the largest remaining intact primary wet limestone forest in Jamaica and is the home to what is likely to be the only viable population of the globally endangered giant swallowtail butterfly. Many of Jamaica's threatened birds are found there, including the endangered Jamaican blackbird, and 95 per cent of our endemic black-billed parrot population. The Cockpit Country also replenishes the aquifers of five major rivers: Black River, Great River, Martha Brae, Montego River, and Hector's River. These rivers supply water to St Elizabeth, Trelawny and St James.

Goat Islands and LNG

I believe the Holness Administration's decisive steps to preserve our environment are very impressive. Two of its big winners to date are the use of liquefied natural gas, and not coal, to fuel the Alpart Bauxite Plant in St Elizabeth, and its decision to scrap the then proposed Goat Islands trans-shipment port project. For its bold decision on Goat Islands, in particular, commendations have come from near and far:

“The Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) and the International Iguana Foundation has congratulated the Jamaica Environment Trust (JET) in light of news that the Government would not be handing over the Goat Islands to China Harbour Engineering Company to build a proposed \$1.5-billion trans-shipment port. The announcement was made last week at a town hall meeting in New York City in which Prime Minister Andrew Holness was asked directly about the status of the islands. Holness elaborated by stating 'There are other locations [for the port] that would do less environmental damage,' the release mentioned.

“ 'The development would have jeopardised the last remaining habitat of the critically endangered Jamaican iguana in the Hellshire Hills on the mainland, sending more than 25 years of work in recovering the species up in smoke, and killed the vision of creating a haven free of introduced predators for the iguana on the Goat Islands,' said Robin Moore, conservation biologist and GWC communications director.” (Jamaica Observer, September 28, 2016)

This Andrew Holness Administration and those of former Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller are worlds apart with regard to the treatment of the environment. Recall, former Transport Minister Dr Omar Davies told us a few years ago that: “It wouldn't be right to refuse a proposal for investment on account of two likkle lizard and so on.” (The Gleaner, August 24, 2014)

'All things are connected'

Last week, in reaction to the defining of boundaries in the Cockpit Country, Phillip Paulwell, Opposition spokesman on mining and energy, said this in Parliament: “We are struck by the Government's generosity as it relates to giving up the bauxite levy at a time when our people are burdened by so much taxation.” This utterance by Paulwell shows a complete lack of understanding of how connected we are to the environment.

In 1854, when the United States Government aggressively offered to buy two million acres of land occupied by the indigenous peoples in the north-west, Chief Seattle, in his famous letter to President Franklin Pierce, made one of the most beautiful statements on man's connectedness to the environment.

These are sections of that letter. “This we know: All things are connected. We are part of the Earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters, the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and the man, all belong to the same family. This shining water that moves in streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and that each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events in the life of my people. The waters murmur is the voice of my father's father. One thing we know: Our God is your God. The Earth is precious to him and to harm the Earth is to heap contempt on its creator.

“Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffaloes are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills is blotted by talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone! Where will the eagle be? Gone! And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival.

“We love this Earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children and love it, as God loves us all.

“As we are a part of the land, you too are part of the land. This Earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know: There is only one God. No man, be he red man or white man, can be apart. We are all brothers.”

It might help some in the People's National Party (PNP) to read Chief Seattle's entire letter.

OCG and Lisa Hanna

The Office of the Contractor General, since its creation by former Prime Minister Edward Seaga, has been telling us about waste, misuse, abuse, and even misappropriation of public funds for 'donkey years'. This screaming headline in the Jamaica Observer of November 22, 2017, 'OCG calls for criminal probe of Lisa's seat, St Ann Municipal Corporation', is frightening.

These details are even more frightening: “The report said that the accounting and accountable officers of the St Ann Municipal Corporation disbursed payments to one man in the amount of \$285,000 without the requisite verification of the satisfactory completion of work in performance of a contract which was awarded by the corporation.

“It questioned whether the actions of the St Ann Municipal Corporation, in preparing documentation which gave the impression that the complete scope of works had been executed by the contract awardee, while having knowledge of the contrary, amounts to an act of fraudulent misrepresentation.

“The OCG report said that contracts were signed after work began and was completed, and noted that the dates were not only irregular, but that this was contrary to best practices. This, it said, is a corruption-enabling practice.

“It added that the failure of the St Ann Municipal Corporation to locate and produce the justification for the award of contract in 25 specific instances amounted to a breach of the Government of Jamaica procurement guidelines.

“There were practices of signing blank contract documents on the part of contractors on the request of officers at the corporation, the report said.

“It said that the practice of group contracts or payments which, in effect, is the grouping of small payments into a sum less than \$500,000, is a suspicious informal practice which has been facilitated by both the constituency office and the St Ann Municipal Corporation. This, the OCG said, is a corruption-enabling practice and facility, which, if left unchecked, will have the result of rampant corruption, whether real or perceived.

“Contractors signed for payments, despite works not being completed or done, the OCG report said. It added that contractors also testified that money from the contract awarded to them were then taken back to the St Ann South Eastern constituency office and given to two employees there.

“The OCG said that a contract was awarded to a councillor of the constituency in the sum of \$300,000 by the St Ann Municipal Corporation in December 2012, because the intended contractor could not read or write.

“Twelve people affiliated with the PNP were recommended for contracts, which the OCG report said, amounts to cronyism and/or favouritism.

“The OCG also recommended that a popular PNP businessman be investigated for obstructing the work of the OCG after he allegedly instructed a woman to withhold information from Harrison's office.

“The report also concluded that the OCG had seen no evidence to indicate that works relating to the paving of the Prickly Pole Primary and Infant School yard, which was the subject of controversy after an 11-year-old girl died, had been undertaken.

“Hanna could not be reached for a comment up to press time yesterday.” (Jamaica Observer, November 22, 2017)

It's not rocket science

Representatives of the International Monetary Fund at a High Level Caribbean Forum, under the theme 'Unleashing Growth and Strengthening Resilience', held at the Jamaica Pegasus two weeks ago, intimated they were befuddled that with all our successes in structural adjustment, Jamaica's economy has not achieved the kind of economic growth expected. The answer is not rocket science. In addition to reasons pinpointed by vice chancellor of The University of the West Indies, Sir Hilary Beckles, in an insightful piece two Sundays ago, I believe we also need to admit that we have wasted billions of dollars in this country on irresponsible and fraudulent activities. Time to bell the cat.

Thompson's drogue parachute

Dr Canute Thompson, it seems, is an avid reader of my columns and evidently listens to the Evening Edition, a radio programme I host on NewsTalk93 FM on Thursdays and Friday 5:30 pm - 7:00 pm. I must confess that I only read Thompson's pieces when he inserts my name into his accounts. My computer, for good or evil, alerts me to publications in which my name is affixed. Some of my regular readers also send me alerts from time to time.

My advice to Thompson is simple. If your objective is what I reckon it is, please point out where I have written a column and or said something on the radio which amounted to falsehood. I anticipate Thompson will have more than a little difficulty in that department. I sincerely hope he is not motivated by a kind of 'Toy Story' mentality.

Jamaica cannot afford to become distracted by those whose primary objective is encapsulated in this revelation by former Agriculture Minister Derrick Kellier, “We are all about power, personal power, and personal aggrandisement and one-upmanship, that is what we are about.” (Jamaica Observer, May 30, 2016)

Jamaica's best days are ahead. I am betting on Jamaica, full stop!