



Professor Anton Allahar as he delivered the Sixth Patrick Emmanuel Memorial Lecture.



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A true democracy, or not?

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ARE we in the English-speaking Caribbean truly democratic?

This was the question asked by Professor Anton Allahar during the Sixth Patrick Emmanuel Memorial Lecture, titled 'The English-Speaking Caribbean: Fifty Years After Independence, Are We Sovereign Yet?'

Held at the Roy Marshall Teaching Complex last week, Professor Allahar's lecture focused on many areas of the theme, the most poignant of which was perhaps his so-called 'myths of democracy'.

"I will outline very briefly six myths of democracy and you will let me know how closely they come to our experiences within the Caribbean. The idea of democracy and the way we consume it masks several facts that need to be underscored," Allahar challenged.

"First, the constitutions of the English-speaking Caribbean countries do not require the leading economic institutions to subject themselves to the popular control of the majority vote. The constitutions of our countries do not say that you are going to have majority vote," Allahar said.

He continued, "The second concern I have with the way we understand democracy, because the main economic institutions influence all aspects of the daily lives of citizens, and because governments are heavily dependent on them for taxes and job creation, they are able to dictate terms to Government in ways that make them independent of Government management."

He pointed out that these institutions are powerful enough to dictate terms to the Government, and the Government is unable to challenge this because these institutions are large employers and tax payers.

"The third issue I have is that it is the unelected private shareholders and the Boards of Directors of the major corporations who have the main say in the economic management and the direction of the society. The unelected Board of Directors and VP's and CEO's and COO and CFO, we don't vote for them," he stated.

Allahar further explained that the power of these corporation 'higher-ups' is far-reaching because even the type of legislation that is passed or enacted – for example, minimum wages, taxation exemptions, interest rates, investment incentives – must accede to their wishes, rather than to those of people.

"The fourth, the economy is privately owned and the private owners can do with it as they please.... We celebrate the fact that it is a private enterprise economy and the private owners do with this economy as they wish every day."

According to him, this reality does not fit with the fiction of democratic societies in which access to the social fruits is held to be equally available to all citizens.

"Fifth, the very personnel who make up the government and occupy key state positions – ministers, deputy ministers, top civil servants, ambassadors, judges, police chiefs, army colonels and so forth – they are not democratically decided on; they are not chosen by the popular vote in our Caribbean.

The Prime Minister is put forward by the members of his or her party, and after the elect on the Prime Minister then appoints, not elects, appoints the Cabinet," Allahar pointed out.

He said that this further highlights the fiction of what is called democracy in the Caribbean, making the point that the members of Government are not randomly selected by the population, but that the myth of capitalist democracy leads us to believe so.

"Sixth, the costs involved in running a campaign are above the financial means of most citizens to get into the race. Successful politicians either have a great deal of personal wealth, or can attract handsome campaign contributions from outside corporations and businesses in whose interest they are expected to act once elected," he noted.

Whether one agrees with the points of Professor Allahar or not, they certainly do trigger a degree of thought and reflect on on what we in the Caribbean call a democracy, and whether that title is, in fact, warranted. **(AN)**

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