UK-Eastern Caribbean Relations: An Enduring Partnership?

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I left Bridgetown in November 2013, after having been privileged to serve as British High Commissioner to Barbados and the six independent states of the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States over the past four years. My role has also included that of UK Representative to CARICOM, and to the OECS as an organisation, as well as Consul-General to the Dutch Caribbean territories.

The relationship between the United Kingdom and the countries of the Eastern Caribbean is a close, indeed intimate one. Our entwined histories over many centuries of course embrace episodes which now seem abhorrent: notably the practice of slavery which underpinned the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. But from the colonial period the newly independent states of the Eastern Caribbean emerged with thriving parliamentary democracies, which contain many parallels to that in Westminster, from the pageantry of the celebrations marking the opening of the parliaments to the unfettered character of the debates. They emerged too with a lively free press. And with regional institutions such as the University of the West Indies and the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, which would continue to develop in the post-
independence period as torch-bearers of calls for closer regional integration. Our shared history is reflected in myriad other ways. ‘Cricket, lovely cricket’, for example, to quote calypsonian Lord Beginner. A carnival tradition stretching from Cropover in Bridgetown to Notting Hill in London. The presence of bread pudding on the menus of restaurants described both as ‘traditional British’ and ‘traditional Caribbean’.

The continued closeness of our ties has above all been about the movement of people. That of Caribbean people after the Second World War, to meet labour demand in the UK in organisations like the National Health Service and London Transport. 22 June this year marked the 65th anniversary of the arrival at Tilbury of the Empire Windrush, carrying 493 passengers from Jamaica. Among them was Lord Kitchener, who crooned ‘London is the place for me’ for the visiting Pathé news crew. Unfortunately many immigrants from the Caribbean did not receive the welcome they deserved. I was delighted to host at my Residence last year an exhibition drawn from a fascinating oral history project of the University of the West Indies, ‘Collecting the Memories’, which documented the experiences of Barbadians who had migrated to the UK. All too often they had experienced racism. But what their accounts demonstrated too is how they overcame this, and helped transform Britain into the much more tolerant, multi-cultural society it is today. Among their number were migrants who have been voted among the greatest of black Britons, like Bishop Wilfred Wood, the first black bishop in the Church of England.

Indeed the contribution of the Commonwealth Caribbean to the development of post-war Britain has been so significant that it is a part of the collective story of Britain, through good times and bad. It is Electric Avenue, Desmond’s barber shop, Don Warrington in Rising Damp, Choice FM, seven members of the England 2006 World Cup squad, the Scarman Report, Emile Ford and the Checkmates, Daffy DeFreitas, Grace Foods, Black Skin Blue Eyed Boys, Diane Abbott, one-man sex machine Theophilus P. Wildebeeste, Rock Against Racism, Broadwater Farm, Benjamin Zephaniah, Pass the Dutchie, Jermain Defoe, Steel Pulse, Stephen Lawrence, saltfish and bonnet peppers at Brixton market, Small Island, Levi Roots’ Reggae Reggae Sauce, Trojan Records, Baroness Amos, Floella Benjamin on Play School, Stuart Hall and The Voice.

These connections continue to be felt in many ways. For example, the continued distinguished service of Eastern Caribbean citizens in the UK armed forces. Grenada born Johnson Beharry
was awarded the Victoria Cross in 2005 for twice saving members of his unit from ambushes in Iraq. Today’s servicemen and women from the Caribbean are heirs to a tradition which encompasses the heroics during the Second World War of such outstanding individuals as Trinidad’s Ulric Cross, sadly recently deceased, awarded both a DFC and DSO for his exploits with the RAF, who later became a distinguished judge and diplomat. Errol Barrow, a future Prime Minister of Barbados, also served in the RAF with great bravery and skill. And as we prepare next year to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, we think too of the great exploits of servicemen from the Caribbean in its terrible battles. For example, the men of the British West Indies Regiment, founded in 1915, which notched up some 81 medals for bravery.

Our continued close connections are felt too through the young people from the Caribbean who choose to continue their studies in the great range of higher education institutions offered by the United Kingdom. One of my most pleasurable tasks as High Commissioner is in saying farewell to the successful awardees of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office-funded Chevening Scholarship: a highly competitive Master’s programme. Past successful awardees include the current St Kitts and Nevis High Commissioner to London, the Foreign Minister of St Lucia and the Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda.

The close relationship also continues to be sustained by the movement of Britons to the Eastern Caribbean as tourists, a movement which in its origins underpinned an economic refocusing of the region away from over-dependence on traditional agricultural products. The attraction of the region is obvious: white sands, turquoise seas, abundant coral reefs and the warmth of the Caribbean welcome. British tourists have long been faithful patrons of islands like Barbados, as the number of Britons reaching the ‘twenty-five trips and over’ club demonstrates. The challenge for the Caribbean is in maintaining its lure among a younger generation of footloose travellers against an ever-expanding range of competing global destinations. I recognise the concerns felt in the Caribbean about the impact of Air Passenger Duty on travel from the UK, but we hope the UK background of a challenging budget deficit is understood. APD makes an essential contribution towards helping the UK government meet its deficit reduction plans. And of course Caribbean countries themselves raise revenue through a range of airport duties and related taxes.
The United Kingdom recognises that the Eastern Caribbean has faced, as have we, a challenging economic picture over the past few years. We recognise too the vulnerabilities of small island developing states, such as those of the Eastern Caribbean, for example to natural disasters, to the effects of climate change, and those due to the small size of domestic markets. We want to see a successful and prosperous Caribbean, and the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID) is funding an impressive regional programme worth some £75 million over four years. This includes a range of initiatives to support economic growth, such as the innovative Compete Caribbean programme, in conjunction with Canada and with the IDB, aiming to enhance regional competitiveness as well as support enterprise innovation. Compete is for example supporting a project in St Lucia, Cellestial, an export-oriented venture involving the manufacturing of electronics and telecommunications equipment, targeting the low-income consumer market. DfID is also supporting the IMF’s Caribbean Regional Technical Assistance Centre (CARTAC), developing the region’s capacity in macro-economic management, revenue management and related disciplines. DfID has provided debt relief to Antigua and Barbuda under the UK’s Commonwealth Debt Initiative, as well as advice to the government of St Kitts and Nevis in support of its current efforts to restructure and reduce its debts.

Climate change presents a major challenge to the small islands of the Caribbean. In a region that is all too familiar with the impact of extreme weather events, such as flooding and hurricanes, climate change will be an additional stress. DfID is helping the region prepare through a £10 million package of climate change adaptation funding, which includes such activity as work implemented by PAHO in St Vincent and the Grenadines and St Kitts and Nevis on the provision of SMART health care facilities that will be resistant to natural disasters, and support for the management of marine protected areas in Grenada and St Lucia. And at the political level, UK and Eastern Caribbean negotiators have worked closely together in pursuit of shared objectives in international climate change negotiations.

Recognising the challenges for the region posed by heavy dependence on imported fuel, as well as in support of greener energy pathways, DfID is providing a £5 million package of support for the development and use of renewable energy and energy efficiency technology in the Caribbean, as well as technical assistance for regulatory reform to promote sustainable energy.
Rising crime rates in the region are a further obstacle to economic growth. And there are domestic UK concerns too around the large quantities of cocaine trafficked through the Eastern Caribbean. Some estimates suggest that around 30 per cent of the crack cocaine in British cities has transited the region. There is a strong and continuing tradition of UK support for the Eastern Caribbean across the security sphere. The new UK National Crime Agency is working closely with Caribbean counterparts in intercepting flows of cocaine. Warships of the Royal Navy provide a welcome presence in the region, with the dual role of supporting the UK's overseas territories as well as independent Caribbean countries afflicted by hurricanes and other natural disasters, and of supporting counter narcotics work. I'm delighted that during the current hurricane season we have the presence in the region of both HMS Lancaster and Royal Fleet Auxiliary Wave Knight. Both the Royal Navy's key roles in the region have been delivered with great success and professionalism. For example, HMS Manchester supported communities in St Lucia hit by landslides following the passage of Hurricane Tomas in 2010. And HMS Lancaster has notched up some considerable drugs seizures over the past few months. For example, in August her crew seized a massive 680kg stash of cocaine with an estimated street value of £100 million from a speedboat near Puerto Rico.

In the international fight against organised crime and drug trafficking it has increasingly become recognised that a focus on the proceeds of crime is just as important as a focus on the interdiction of the drugs themselves. Money is the raison d'être of the criminal activity, and by confiscating criminal assets, the attractiveness of crime is reduced. Thus DfID is funding a Caribbean Criminal Asset Recovery Programme (CCARP), based out of the High Commission in Barbados, helping to mentor financial intelligence units, as well as providing advice on the use of proceeds of crime and anti money-laundering legislation.

We also have a thriving programme of support for criminal justice reform in the Eastern Caribbean, through a Criminal Justice Advisor based at the British High Commission but funded through the US Caribbean Basin Security Initiative. This work has included support for vulnerable witnesses in Dominica, St Vincent and the Grenadines and St Kitts and Nevis to provide evidence by video link, as well as the passage in the same countries of Interviewing of Suspects for Serious Crimes Acts, providing for the video recording of suspect interviews for serious offences.
Of course, the United Kingdom is also a member state of the European Union. As such we are a major contributor to the European Development Fund, whose sums are considerable: around €1 billion is anticipated for the Caribbean as a whole, in a mix of national and regional programmes, for the period 2014-20. The centrepiece of European Union engagement with the Caribbean is the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), and the UK is providing bilateral support to help the region derive full advantage from it, for example through CARTFund, a £10 million DFID-funded trust fund at the Caribbean Development Bank, which provides grants for governments to build their capability to implement the trade agreement and for private sector groups to identify and take advantage of market opportunities. This work is all underpinned by the United Kingdom’s strong commitment to promoting free trade as a motor for growth and development. CARTFund projects are for example supporting tourism and nutmeg sector development in Grenada, and helping Dominica develop its export strategy.

As a member state of the European Union we recognise both the gains to be made through closer regional integration – the European Single Market has for example been a boon to business in Britain and across Europe – and also the challenges. Of course, discussions on the pace of regional integration are for Caribbean countries themselves: but we are providing practical support, for example through a DFID-funded programme to help reform the CARICOM Secretariat to ensure that it is best suited to meeting the contemporary challenges it faces. And we have been impressed at the resolve of OECS members to deepen their integration through the implementation of the revised Treaty of Basseterre.

The countries of CARICOM can have a powerful voice on the international stage. Their work in highlighting the threats to small island states posed by climate change, the growing scourge of non-communicable diseases, and in securing the agreement to an Arms Trade Treaty are all examples. It would be good to hear that voice more clearly in other contexts too, for example in providing a clear and consistent voice in support of the rights of self determination, the very principle on which the independence movements of the region were founded, for the people of the Falkland Islands. We were though delighted that the Foreign Ministers of CARIFORUM unanimously agreed at the UK-Caribbean Forum in Grenada last year their support for
the principles and the right to self determination for all peoples, including the Falkland Islanders, recognising the importance of self determination in the political development of the Caribbean, and its core status as an internationally agreed principle under the United Nations Charter.¹

And in this context it is good also to see that the majority of member states of the OECS have now recognised the independence of Kosovo.

We continue to encourage the states of the Eastern Caribbean to reform outmoded colonial-era legislation which perpetuates the death penalty and continues to discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.

The centre-piece of the UK’s political engagement with the Caribbean is the biennial UK-Caribbean Forum. In January 2012 UK Foreign Secretary William Hague led a team of four British Ministers to meet his Caribbean counterparts in Grenada. The resulting Action Plan underlines, through 32 action points across the economic, security and foreign policy agendas, the closeness of our strategic partnership: a shared partnership based on shared history and shared understanding. We look forward to welcoming Caribbean Foreign Ministers to the next edition of the UK-Caribbean Forum in London next year. I’m only sad that, as I prepare to move to a new diplomatic assignment, I won’t be there. But I will be taking from the Caribbean much more than sand in my shoes; I will be taking a sense that, while there are the occasional points of disagreement of the kind found within any close family, the UK’s relationship with the Eastern Caribbean is truly an enduring partnership.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Paul Brummell is the UK’s Ambassador-Designate to Romania, a post which he will take up in August 2014. He joined he UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1987, and he served as British High Commissioner to Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean between 2009 and 2013. He was concurrently UK representative to CARICOM, the OECS and Consul-General to the Dutch Caribbean. He has formerly also served as British Ambassador to Turkmenistan and to Kazakhstan (and concurrently non-resident Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan). A fan of digital diplomacy, he can be followed on Twitter at @PaulBrummell.
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