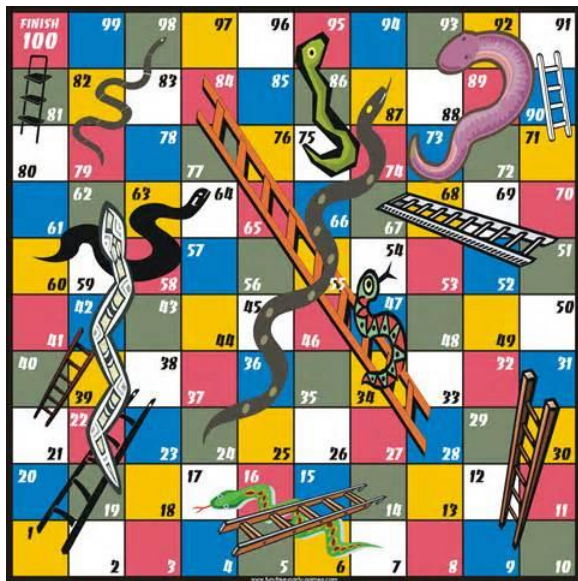


## Snakes and Ladders in Public Administration: Putting Barbados in a State of Economic Viability

There can be much to be derived out of the sober utterances that are spilled by a man not seemingly daunted by drowsiness or other lethargic effects of prolonged sleep. This article takes as its starting point the simplicity of the game – *snakes and ladders* – an Indian inspired, all-time favourite of many pre-adolescent children. The minimalism of snakes and ladders stems from its lack of any meaningful skill component in the execution of the game or in the attainment of the victor’s crown.



Notwithstanding, snakes and ladders was conceptualised with a deeper, moral, and sensitising agenda. Inherently, the choices of good and bad are included to signify the dialectical transformations emerging out of

the contexts of values versus vices. There is the dynamism that links with performances to produce upward mobility in contrast to downward or backward falling. The aggregate difficulties (i.e. snakes) to be encountered are significantly more than the available opportunities (i.e. ladders) for climbing. It is by a mixture of self-determination and fortune in relation to similar circumstances facing at least one other participant/competitor that the outcome is manifested but never assured.

Taking the preceding insights from the game snakes and ladders for their moral and ethical seriousness, the inferences are applicable to Prime Minister Freundel Stuart’s choice of language and figurative speech. It may be a misnomer regarding the concept of *primus inter pares* given the awesome power of Barbados’ prime ministers. Nonetheless, PM Stuart demonstrated his version of accountability and transparency with a good gesture by telling all and sundry that urgently needed was “a fiscal consolidation strategy that does not inflict great injury on our businesses, the economy and the quality of life of our people.”

Put differently, June 27, 2013 may have been the first public occasion that the ‘decent man’ acknowledged what many

Barbadian businesses and families, together with the international institutions have stated in several different formats inclusive of the 'junk status' characterisation by the credit rating agencies. PM Stuart told Barbados that "the major challenge that confronts the Government pertains to the determination of a policy choice that finds the right balance between fiscal consolidation and a sustained economic expansion that is led by the foreign exchange earning sectors." There can be no doubt that PM Stuart has a moral compass.

Said on a previous occasion prior to the last general elections in Barbados, perhaps a majority of the electorate may have rejected the ruse of increased capital expenditure and the borrowing to pay public wages when those in the private sector suffered the lay-offs. The country's fiscal situation was being worsened by a Medium Term Fiscal Strategy that was being stubbornly imposed causing many to shudder against the evidence that the wrong medicine was being prescribed due to the wrong diagnosis. Simultaneously there were significant declines in the major sectors of the economy in the final quarter of the last financial year; and the first few months in 2013, when Barbados needed to register growth to counter the stagnation alluded to

by the Governor of the Central bank towards the year end 2012, there were hefty declines and especially in tourism.

There can be little doubt that Mr. Stuart anticipates an end to the economic storms which have thrown many Barbadians' ladders asunder. This favourable affirmation is in spite of Mr. Stuart continuing to pass culpability as if the Arthur years or the post-2008 world were the inflexible game board upon which the DLP's success or failures hinged in terms of macroeconomic management.



Perhaps, there is partial merit, but with each passing day and with an administration into its sixth year of unimpressive governance, the continuous qualms without achieving positive results will be more debilitating for the country. There are some individuals believing that it is certainly possible to describe the Stuart-led administration as one paralysed by incompetence, ignorance, procrastination, and 'executive' stubbornness. These traits

are only surpassed by the lack of innovation or show of political will in policymaking over the past three years.

Does the game of snakes and ladders also have significance for Mr. Chris Sinckler, the current embattled Minister of Finance? Perhaps, there was an unusual silence from this boisterous Minister of Finance. One can believe that similar to last year on June 26, when in the wrap up of his 'budget' presentation, Mr. Sinckler revealed to Barbadians something that almost went unnoticed had it not been a political game in which ladders and snakes appear more plentiful as part of other agendas.



Sinckler said then that: “during my wilderness experience I have been dealing with areas of laziness, procrastination, selfishness, jealousy and pride in my life. Yes, I have issues too but one thing is sure, because of this wilderness experience I am a better person today than I was last June.”

PM Stuart is saying to Barbadians that the country is not better off today, and he is concerned about the fate of the quality of life that Barbadians have grown accustomed.

Unfortunately, Barbados has been forced into the same ‘wilderness’ and based on those attributes mentioned by Mr. Sinckler, one has to consider if the inherited game board was by far a greater challenge to him than would have been supposed by Mr. Stuart even in circumstances wherein on more than one occasion ‘foot and mouth disease’ competed with the possibilities opened to the outcomes in a game of snakes and ladders. In the Ernst & Young’s Focus on the 2012 Budget, it was stated in the executive summary that:

The Minister was forced to acknowledge that stubbornly high unemployment rates continue unabated, inflation remains above any reasonable medium term target and the economic outlook remains one of tepid growth and continued deficit spending. Faced with these multiple threats the Minister attempted to articulate a balanced course between growth and austerity constructed around a mixture of traditional and novel fiscal measures.

Realistically, the forthright observation made by Barbados Private Sector Association Chairman John Williams is a

reiteration coming another year later. Williams indicated that there is necessity for a “transformation in the way” in which Barbados operates; and that substantial change is essential “by the public sector, by the private sector, by the labour movement and indeed by our society,” given that Barbados has become more deeply mired in dangers and challenges, or in Stuartian discourse, snakes and ladders. The Barbados Cabinet, and relevant authorities and stakeholders, according to Williams, have collectively “failed to take the necessary corrective action in a timely manner.” This is similar to the admission of the prime minister.



Furthermore, there are moral, ethical, and more pragmatic lessons to be taught in the macroeconomic arena of Barbados. In March 2007, Owen Arthur as the Prime Minister of the day correctly assessed that “much needs to be done to improve the conditions for future growth of our sectors. We now also have to refine some of the

policies we have been deploying to take advantage of emerging or untapped opportunities, or to mitigate the impact of risks and constraints our enterprises face in the market place.” The game board of snakes and ladders was in place prior to Owen Arthur. For instance, Dr. Richard Haynes on March 13, 1989 instructively said that:

*There is no developing country that has got into trouble because of revenue restraint. Every single one of them has got into trouble because of ever increasing public expenditure and the methods by which that expenditure has been financed. ... [And] it has always been irresponsible levels of public expenditure that have been one of the primary causes of creating serious economic problems ... and therefore when corrective measures have to be taken at considerable pain either to the entire country or to the public servants of the country, it is always in the area of controlling public expenditure.*

There can be hardly a doubt that grave errors have been made regarding Barbados’ approach to recessionary recovery that became more a fiscal problem defined by unnecessary capital projects and untimely social entitlements granted by the state. The fiscal imprudence and failure to restructure the public sector invited a situation in which the country has found itself careened into more unproductive



manipulations by the existing relationship of the Tom Adams Financial Centre (the Central Bank) and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs.

Indeed, Williams warns that “We in Barbados must act to help ourselves and we must do so with great urgency. If we don’t do it for ourselves, some external agency will tell us what to do.” The fiscal problems may now have been exacerbated with the onset of monetary policy failures with the ‘new money’ that is finding it difficult to get into national circulation.



Leader of the Opposition, Miss Mia Mottley has emphatically reminded Barbadians that: “having failed to act on the problems of the public sector ... the Government has now indicated that the scale of the public sector adjustment needed this year is approximately \$400 million. This situation has not arisen overnight and that is why the BLP has been calling for

action for the last 4 years since 2009.” Everything suggests crunch time for Barbados given the longevity and deepening of crisis and decadence; the big sacrifice that must be made by the public sector; the national apprehension to devaluation and floating rates; and the symbolic and real directives that can come from an IMF which is always lurking nearby.

\$50 note (The Right Excellent Errol Barrow)



\$100 note (The Right Excellent Sir Grantley Adams)



There has been a major error regarding the evaluation of symptoms and the prognosis necessary to set the stage for Barbados’ macroeconomic treatment. Using the snakes and ladders game board, in July 2012 the Governor of the Central bank was stating that “with patience and determination on the part of all, the current strategy charts the path to future recovery.” Almost one year later, the snakes appear to have multiplied because the public finances continue to bleed profusely while an ill-devised, untimely, and wrongly focussed Medium Term Fiscal Strategy has done

little or nothing to avert Barbados' moribund capacity "to create an enabling environment" as Mr. Stuart suggests.

The fact that in 2013 PM Stuart says rather uncomplicated that "the challenge now, therefore, is to reduce the fiscal deficit while maintaining a reasonably adequate safety net and taking those steps that would promote sustained growth in the economy," is a recognition of failure dressed in the gamesmanship that would allow good taste to be reflected in the moral fibre of a snakes and ladders game. I too agree with the prime minister when he calls for a 'different' direction "that re-energises the engines of growth and innovation in our economy, and enhance the quality of life for our people." Surely there was a combination of incompetence, ignorance, and stubbornness being exhibited by the post-2008 DLP administration. This claim is given the DLP's reluctance to accept sage advice or to avoid the pitfalls that so many warned about as they had previously tried to reach the winner's marker on the snakes and ladders board!

The words of Sir Leroy Trotman may not have the same abstract importance to Barbadians as the familiarly hidden messages sent by those long past their attraction to playing a game of snakes and

ladders. Nonetheless, Sir Leroy contends that "unless we are able to practise within a shared vision" those things morally and ethically good and of value for Barbados, then he senses that Barbadians "are going to have the problems resulting from the discarding of the consultative process," and already, he reasons that there are "elements of it now in 2013." Sir Leroy stresses that: "I sense evidence of efforts to suppress the interest of others and I think it is dangerous, and I sense a wish being put into practise to impose by force on those who may have less strength than we have. ... [It] is not the moment for divisive behaviour; we need more than ever before the services, the contributions and the goodwill of each one of us."

