In contemporary Barbados, several questions are being raised by the inquiring citizen whose voice attracts the political whip. Many persons could care less of an individual’s curiosity or the need to know once burning issues are scrutinised. Inquirers and commentators are often and dismissively thrown into the political camps of the Barbados Labour Party (BLP) or the Democratic Labour Party (DLP). In relation to the current Cabinet or executive, there are increasing trends of neo-authoritarianism being exhibited on a regular and disconcerting basis. This observation is profound and it serves to demarcate an approach to governance that is not consistent with the 2008 or 2013 DLP’s manifesto promises.

Issue after issue, there are repeated cautions that are registered against those persons and/or groups critical of governmental policies, actions or inactions. In turn, apathy and determinism have mimicked the cowardly forms of inevitability demonstrated by the national executive. The paralysis to say or do anything different in order to achieve favourable results has become comatose among the population. This eventuality can be likened to an administration that persistently suggests that ‘its hands are tied due to the worse recession the world has witnessed in 100 years’ without indicating anything substantial regarding escape and/or recovery. Self-fulfilling prophecies and a liking for discourses of inevitability have infected the Barbadian polity to the point that national institutions are under severe strains and pressures.

In today’s Barbados, the political elites are aware that the political system is being perceived in distasteful terms. Yet, there is a silence across Barbados that has become strikingly symbolic wherein there is the visible prevalence of injustice, institutional fractures, and the usurpation of rights which are compounded by gross political interference of the most nefarious kinds. In the most recent times, there are growing observations that the governance architecture in Barbados is being run aground by nebulous policy frameworks and the ridiculous and pompous redefinitions of concepts such as democracy and restructuring. Vague concepts are used frustratingly to communicate change or to
gain support for programmes that are untimely, under-researched, and on the evidence have failed to satisfy the actual needs and wants of the Barbados population in terms of economy and society.

Easily springing to mind are the examples of the Community Councils wherein the notion of democracy was redefined but the fruits of the redefinition have produced divided communities within the larger Barbadian polity. Constitutive of the constituency councils, for the most part, are numerous hand-picked maidens. Unfortunately, a broader cadre of societal members are not being actively influenced in participatory democracy. This means that with every good intention there are descriptively more cases of disengagement by community members due to the government’s failure to embrace and engage practices that can encourage of communicative and deliberative democracy.

Another example has to be the Medium Term and Fiscal Strategy (MTFS) that has far-outlived its usefulness and which rather than bringing Barbados from recession to recovery and then growth, has left a trail of economic stagnation. Underlying the failures of this MTFS is the proclivity to silence the private sector and caution civil society while preaching a divisive sermon that ‘not a single public sector worker’ will be released from an overburdened, duplicated, and most cumbersome drain on the Barbados economy. Compounding the inherited and self-made problems of inertia and reckless choices made by the executive is unprecedented stubbornness which is exacerbated by the constant institutional manipulation by government’s careless and interfering hands. As it is, Barbados is fast becoming a splintered economy and society that is increasingly imperilled by the following:

- the absence of economic growth but entrenched stagnation;
- political vindictiveness characterised through the subtle threats being articulated by executive members to citizens and the opposition political party;
- lack of appropriate or sufficient communication from the governing to the governed;
- attempts to use and abuse the power of political appointees, and the legitimacy of commissions in order to pursue vain, controversial, partisan, and other costly means of dislocating (i.e. temporarily or permanently) Barbadian citizens in the pursuit of their business;
- arbitrary denial of citizens to decent work and to safeguard their livelihoods; and,
the belligerence on display by factions of the political apparatus regarding citizens’ fundamental human rights inclusive of other social, civil, economic, and political rights.

It is precisely these background issues that reveal the institutional paralysis and decay that is confronting Barbados’ abysmal governance. That so many Barbadians would have welcomed legislation on the freedom of information, and on accountability and transparency, is a recognisable omission by the DLP. Indeed, an international agent remarked in 2012 that “the DLP has so far failed to make good on its promise to introduce a new Freedom of Information Act to address” matters of national concern. Barbados and its citizens are on a collision course regarding tenets of democracy. There is turmoil within the constitutional and legal pillars providing for the effectiveness and legitimacy of the institutions which themselves, ought to be indicative of proper functioning governance relationships.

A 2009 international publication suggests that “an absence of institutional accountability leads to repressive and arbitrary governance, and to entrenched, rampant corruption.” Certainly, Barbados in 2013 cannot run the risk of abandoning institutional accountability; nor can the country take for granted that several occurrences happening elsewhere in the Caribbean region and the world could not happen in or effect little Barbados. It is dismissive of reality for Barbadians to claim that they possess a country that is simply too passive to mull over legitimate protests and demonstrate resistance to those who govern with impunity.

If it be said that this writer or the Barbados Association for Justice and Empowerment (BAJE) is stoking fires of conflict or invoking criminal elements that may lead to a groundswell of insurrection, one can be guided by former a former prime minister of Barbados rather than any sitting DLP Member of Parliament. In 1990, Erskine Sandiford warned that the “criminal violation of democracy and human rights ... is outrageous and repugnant.” In 2013, Barbadians must reject in the strongest legitimate way and, with the lawful and available means any violation of their democratic and human rights.

BAJE is convinced that on the current course, Barbados under the docile but probably uninspiring leadership of Prime Minister Freundel Stuart will become a tattered democracy sooner rather than later. Given the situation that has grabbed attention for almost one week thus far, in which on Monday evening, June 17th 2013,
Barbadians were jolted to attention by news that the Commissioner of Police (CP), Mr. Darwin Dottin, was being jettisoned from active duty in the Royal Barbados Police Force (PBPF). Dottin was being punitively sent on administrative leave in the first instance to be followed-up by the more permanent status of compelled retirement. This writer is not challenging the merits or demerits regarding Mr. Dottin’s ‘age’ nor does it seek to uncover or speculate upon any transgressions that may have been perpetrated by Mr. Dottin during his tenure of CP.

The Police Service Commission (PSC) working through the highest institutional office in Barbados, the Governor General, could easily be interpreted to constitute the ‘executioners’ in the alarming and unprecedented actions taken against the CP. The situation has self-evidently unfolded to the point that there are fundamental matters that have become sub judice. Should Barbadians be concerned about these and related actions involving the institution vested to uphold the law, prevent crime and to maintain civil order and the peace? The unequivocal answer has to be yes.

However, against a strong sense of procedural correctness when dealing with an individual’s rights to a livelihood, and having an ethical compass regarding fair and impartial treatment for citizens, BAJE is obliged to present a challenge and infuse further considerations into the debate on the unprecedented action. This is especially in light of the processes and procedures to be followed by the legally competent bodies regarding the recruitment, functions, performances, promotions, and disciplinary actions taken against public servants.

The Barbados Constitution and other relevant laws are instructive with the Public Service Act indicating that “each Commission shall, in carrying out its functions ... ensure transparency, fairness and justice ... proper management ... including the development of the human resources ... as its primary goal.” The Barbados Constitution is clear that the PSC “shall consist of a Chairman and not less than two nor more than four other members, who shall be appointed by the Governor-
General, acting on the recommendation of the Prime Minister after consultation with the Leader of the Opposition.” Perhaps less clear for the layman is the correct procedure regarding the removal of the CP from office given that there is no public record that the Governor General constituted a tribunal and against a letter making it into the public domain it appears that the Governor General was advising the PSC rather than the other way around.

Furthermore, there are conventions, treaties, and declarations that the Barbados government signs on the behalf of its people. Indeed, together with 33 other Organisation of American States (OAS), Barbados has committed itself to defending “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, free and fair elections and the transparency and accountability of government institutions and those who run them.” These dimensions are crucial in terms of governance, capacity building in institutions, and empowering the citizenry whilst acknowledging and accentuating the basic human, social, economic, civil, and political rights of the individual. The treatment meted out to the CP, therefore calls into question the very things that Barbados has committed itself to defending, and at least since 2011 has submitted reports indicating Barbados’ commitments and progress.

Moreover, Barbados has been privy to discussions and the exchange of ideas in various forums regarding a proposed ‘Model Law on Access to Public Information’ and guidelines for its implementation, in keeping with international standards. At the 42nd Regular Session of the OAS in Bolivia, Barbados reaffirmed both its position and commitment regarding “the importance of access to information as an indispensable requirement for democracy,” as well as joining with other OAS member states “to respect and uphold the principle of providing access to public information.” What has changed in Barbados since February 2012? A general election occurred; and it perhaps may have left in the minds of winning candidates of the side forming the government an unmistakable belief that victory at the ballot box provides an ‘unquestionable’ mandate. This folly
additionally isolates those governing from listening to their constituents and hence they become totally averse to constructive criticism and legitimate protest?

Crucially at stake are matters of Barbados’ democracy coupled with a strong sense that social justice and impartiality should prevail for all persons living in Barbados. Barbados must be strict guardians of the country’s heritage by being resolute on things such as the rule of law, high levels of integrity from the state institutions inclusive of the PSC, RBPF, and high demands for accountability and transparency by those visible but silent political elements governing Barbados’ affairs.

Indeed, the most worrisome aspects apart from any formal statements being given to the public in Barbados from those who govern regarding the sending on ‘permanent’ leave of the CP are the numerous warnings from current and past members of the RBPF and other citizens. Personally, this writer has received ‘advice’ to be quiet and not oppose what has been done thus far by the PSC. Additionally, an entry on a popular blog warns that “I would advise Ms Mottley, her cohorts and the ever-present government antagonists in the print and electronic media to desist from their inflammatory statements and partisan views; hold their breath and await the evidence. They will be shocked at the overwhelming proof; and that is putting it mildly.” Several persons fail to realise that the things most at stake are not Ms. Mottley’s political career, the BLP’s capacity to oppose, the DLP’s inclination to be aloof, or the drowsiness in national leadership.

George C. Brathwaite
President: Barbados Association of Justice and Empowerment (BAJE)
Email: baje2013@yahoo.com