Restore Free Education At The UWI! - 9/5/16

In the interest of clarity of understanding we should begin by noting that the phrase “free education” is a misnomer! Education is never really “free”. The reality is that the educational system of every nation is paid for in one way or another by the society of that nation.

When, as was the case of Barbados until approximately two years ago , Government bore the cost of public education from the primary to the tertiary level, what was essentially happening was that Government was requiring all citizens and taxpayers to contribute to the cost of education, rather than allowing the financial burden to fall exclusively on the shoulders of the young students and their biological parents.

And this is how it should be, for the entire society has a vested interest in ensuring that as many members of the society as possible are educated and trained!

As the level of education and training rises in a society, the entire society benefits from the overall increase in productivity, growth, cultural refinement and development. Thus since every citizen and resident of Barbados benefits from the education of our Barbadian youth, it is entirely appropriate that the cost of education be considered a national social cost to be shared across the entire spectrum of the national population.

This view of education also dovetails [fits] with the notion that education is a fundamental human right and an architectonic civil right that is located at the very foundation of the social contract upon which our national society is founded.

If we subscribe to a philosophy in which the human being is seen as a special creature made in the likeness and image of almighty God and distinguished from the lower creatures by the possession of a God-given capacity for cognition and mental creativity, then it will occur to us that every human society bears an inalienable responsibility to nurture and develop that divine intellectual gift.

Thus, the education of the young should not be dependent on the vagaries of individual family or personal wealth! Rather, the society should guarantee access to this fundamental human and civil right through a system of so-called “free education”.

But, along with the philosophical justification for free primary, secondary and tertiary education in Barbados, comes an empirical, fact-based justification. The reality is that the system of “free primary, secondary and tertiary education” has served Barbados well! Our country has grown and developed because of its “free education” policies, and has been able to attain a quality of social equality and stability that is the envy of many nations.

A few years ago, Professor Nigel Harris, the then Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, sought to urge Barbados to follow the example of Jamaica in requiring its young citizens to bear the financial costs of their tertiary education at the UWI. But even whilst urging this course of action on us Barbadians, Professor Harris was forced to admit the socially destructive and evil consequences of the Jamaican system when he admitted that there are Jamaican students, who, saddled with the burden of university fees, “are near starvation because they don’t have the funding on which to live”.

We also have the negative example of the United States of America – a country in which the best and most prestigious “Ivy League” tertiary education is reserved for the wealthy and privileged, and in which poorer students graduate from university with tremendous financial debts around their necks.

This — to our credit– was not the Barbadian way for the vast majority of our 50 years as an independent nation! Thanks to such enlightened statesmen as T. T. Lewis, Cameron Tudor and Errol Barrow, the Barbadian model of “free education” exemplified the most advanced and elevated human and social values, and was also a practical success story.

Sadly, this shining Barbadian accomplishment was fractured some two years ago when the current Democratic Labour Party administration imposed tuition fees on Barbadian students attending the University of the West Indies, thereby causing close to 4,000 Barbadians to drop out of the system of tertiary education.

In this 50th anniversary year of Barbados’ independence I hereby call upon Prime Minister Freundel Stuart to restore that social jewel of our independent nation– our system of “free education” at our University of the West Indies.

David Comissiong
President
Clement Payne Movement

1. What is the main point of the article?
2. According to the author, why is free education so important?
3. What role does education play in Barbados?
4. What happened at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica?
5. What was the consequence of charging tuition fees in Barbados?
6. How does the author define “free education”?