

Civil War in Trinidad

CHANNEL 4's current series, 'The Empire's Children' is worth seeing, not only for illustration of a British heritage, which is far from that which Gordon Brown, our current Prime Minister professes as fair play, democracy, and the best in world civilisation.

The series brings into sharp focus the savage exploitation of colonial peoples including children, and the authoritarian and totalitarian ways of the rulers of Great Britain and their missionaries abroad. Barbarism reigned in the pursuit of profit, which enriched the ruling caste back home.

Last week's programme focussed on Trinidad, the tiny Caribbean island, which I left some 46 years ago to live in London. It illustrated not only the past but managed to throw a ray of light on that country's current social crisis. The cameras accompanied young Chris Bissoon, a Mancunian actor, back to Trinidad in search of his roots.

We were introduced to his 96-year-old great-grandfather who was kidnapped as a child from India along with his mother and shipped out by the British to Trinidad to replace the African slaves on the sugar plantations following emancipation. The old man told us that he started manual labour as a child and



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Darcus Howe

yourviews@gvmedia.co.uk

never had a glimpse of a class room in his life. He added that along with his mother and other labourers he

was shipped with a length of rope by the white overseers.

They were not quite slaves as the Africans before them but were elevated to the category of indentured labourers herded into barrack rooms on the sugar plantations. They were the lowest of the low and were referred to disparagingly as 'coolies'.

Young Bissoon brought my past into sharp focus. I spent my early

childhood on such a plantation. My father was the headmaster of the village school at which my mother also taught. I recall, as though it were yesterday the procession of labourers wending their weary way from impoverished homes to the plantation where they worked from sunup to sundown, all hands on deck. Child mortality rates soared and there existed little solidarity from the ex-African slaves, much more than that; the divide and rule policy, hotly promoted by the authoritarian caste kept the oppressed classes separated.

For decades Trinidad teetered on the brink of a race war between citizens of African and Indian descent. And these hostilities have not faded with time. Let me illustrate.

I quote from a recent speech delivered by Max Richards, in his official capacity as President of the Nation State of 'Trinidad and Tobago... Partisan' approaches based principally on race, seem to be in the ascendancy on both sides of the divide and it is not a good thing." It gets much worse. Only a couple of minutes away, the President of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union in Trinidad and Tobago: addressed his membership at the 68th Anniversary of the Trade Union. He described the hostilities between the races Indians and

Africans as verging on civil war. These were his exact words and I quote: "In fact civil war couldn't be far off and if anybody has to intervene it has to be the OWTU." Then he outlines what the leadership of the union proposes to do: "The OWTU has to intervene in what is happening." The president general adds the following and that is that they will be mounting a platform in every nook and cranny of the country offering leadership to citizens.

So, the land of soca and steel band is on the brink of civil war. This state of affairs seems at odds with an oil rich nation swimming in petro dollars. The opposite is the case. Those at the base of the society are driven to anger, when before their very eyes, the rich parade their wealth, flaunt their authority undermining the line in the national anthem: "Every creed and race find an equal place." There is a substantial Trinidadian population here in the United Kingdom who dare not take their eyes off the ball or continue to ignore the reality of the tiny island state while passing it off as paradise.

We cannot continue to blame our former colonial masters. We have been independent since 1962 – enough time to build bridges over troubled waters.

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It's business as usual at the BBC

LAST YEAR, a then BBC executive and I went head to head in a debate in Sydney entitled: Can the media be trusted?

Enlisting the BBC's apparent reputation for integrity, he argued in favour of the motion and I against. He was defeated by 88 votes to 2. As well as my compelling arguments, it was his own arrogance that contributed to his defeat. When challenged by a discerning audience, the executive invoked the BBC's '3D' strategy: Defensiveness, Denial and Disdain (Radio 4 'Feedback' listeners will know what I mean). Had he shown the slightest humility in the face of legitimate challenge, the outcome might have been quite different. Like most media executives, this BBC man was not used to public scrutiny and there was an obvious



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Tess Finch Lees

yourviews@gvmedia.co.uk

disconnect between his reality and that of his audience. Answering to the great unwashed was an obvious inconvenience, wherein admitting a mistake was tantamount to conceding defeat. Yet, the ability to admit mistakes is a fundamental pre-requisite to learning from them and being a trustworthy broadcaster. Given this culture of contempt, should anyone be surprised at the recent phone-in scandals? Worse, Mark Thompson's response does little to reassure me that any lessons have been learned.

He announced that those responsible have been asked to 'step back' from their roles. An interesting, if misleading, play on words which leads us to believe they've been sacked. It's true that Richard Marson, the editor responsible for 'Blue Petergate', and arguably the greatest offender, did 'step back', albeit voluntarily, from his duties. But, far from being sacked, his punishment for bringing the BBC into disrepute was to be given even more responsibilities in an executive producer role. That'll teach him! Thompson's other proposal is to usher everyone onto an ethics course. Such knee jerk remedies address symptoms not causes.

Meanwhile, they conveniently divert attention from the real malaise at the BBC: A system-wide culture of contempt for the very public it purports to serve. Culture comes from the top and amounts to much more than a few words on the back of a staff identity card. It was ultimately Thompson's responsibility to have prevented this debacle by sending proactive messages about acceptable behaviour throughout the corpora-

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tion. Effective, trustworthy leaders invest in fire prevention. They know it costs much more to put the fire out, that's if there's anything left to salvage from the burning rubble.

A trustworthy BBC would take the issue of diversity and inclusion seriously. Rather than seeing it as a threat it would be welcomed as an opportunity to win over marginalized and alienated audiences by appointing decision makers that reflect their reality in the cutting room. A trustworthy BBC wouldn't banish diversity to the ghetto of HR where it's afforded no access to key decision makers, no power and thus no credibility internally.

A trustworthy BBC wouldn't appoint token women and minorities to senior positions based on their willingness to conform to, rather

than challenge, the status quo. At the time of Live 8, I was invited to participate as a member of the audience in a BBC World Service recording discussing what Africans think of the G8. The African panel was impressive and the audience, frustrated by their exclusion from the BBC's mainstream coverage, were itching to make their voices heard.

The atmosphere was lively and charged with passion. The programme that went out later that week however, was sanitised beyond all recognition. The producers had edited out comments relating to anything in any way 'controversial', such as the genocide in Darfur, slavery and colonialism. What was left was an insipid, anodyne, misleading production, which was quite literally a whitewash of what was supposed to be a forum for black African voices.

Clearly trust and integrity weren't high on the producers' agenda. Any ethics training at the BBC should start at the top and if future scandals are to be avoided the board needs to become far more representative of, and accountable to, its licence paying public. But first there must be a change of leadership and an injection of humility. If Mark Thompson was serious about restoring trust, he would have done the honourable thing and resigned.

Tess Finch-Lees advises the media on issues of ethics, leadership and social responsibility.

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