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Columns

UWI Mona and Math Department mired in backwardness

Wignall's World

Mark Wignall
Sunday, April 15, 2007



Wilmot Perkins, from his popular radio programme, Perkins Online, seems to derive extreme pleasure in describing the University of the West Indies as 'the intellectual ghetto'.

As one who spent some time in the Natural Sciences Department of the Mona campus in the early 1970s, my initial reaction when I first heard the 'ghetto' description was, 'Oh, Perkins is deliberately provocative, loves to label institutions and persons of note, plus, he never attended the place, so, he feels safe in bashing it.'

Over the years I have learned to appreciate Perkins' description, especially where it refers to the Mona Campus.

Some years ago, the Stone Team conducted a survey among staff of the UWI Mona Campus. When one of the survey team supervisors telephoned a staff member who had a PhD and prefaced her name by the normal 'Mrs', she shot back in mid sentence with the correction, 'Doctor!' That haughty approach pretty much gives one an entree into the cloistered world of the UWI Mona campus.

All one has to do is witness the guild elections at UWI Mona campus to recognise that too high a percentage of what the university churns out as graduates is not much different in public behaviour from the rabble associated with stealing votes in national general elections.

There is, I believe, consensus on the view that most of our political leadership, which defines the cues given to leadership in other spheres, has failed us.

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At present we are divided on the present political leadership, which is, in my estimation, one defined by its inability to spell out in plain language the direction this country needs to move towards. Additionally, this seems to be the first time in our history that we have ever had a prime minister doing on-the-job training.

After 45 years of independence, the predatory machinery called 'government' has to borrow to pay salaries, we have a debt close to \$1 trillion, the second highest debt to GDP in the world and, were it not for Haiti, we would have the lowest GDP per capita in the region. All this when in the early 1960s Jamaica was at the top of the list of countries which were 'destined to take off.'



A section of the University of the West Indies Mona campus.

To hear our prime minister resorting to religious quackery and political stupidity in telling us that something will happen this year, which will lead to prosperity in the nation, is simply a slap in the face of the intelligent and those others who probably believe that her next great act is to pull a fat, cooked rabbit out of an orange coloured hat.

The sad part about the political leadership is, there are sensible people inside the government who recognise that the Portia Simpson Miller leadership has become an unmitigated disaster, yet they support and back her openly because she represents to them breakfast in the morning and supper at nights. Where second-tier leadership can summon the will to upset the balance of power inside a political entity and cause said entity to move in a whole new direction, those in the PNP have made the choice of covering behind their curtains while endorsing her on public platforms.

It is all about protecting THEIR positions, THEIR status and for those hungry ones chomping at the bits and eager to go for the first time, it guarantees THEIR pension.

The leadership knows this, so it dances on religious platforms as it attempts to convert us into one big Pocomania republic. It does this because it knows that party politics in this country is all about holding true to the tenets of the gang (called a party), where all members pretend to bat for the people when in truth

their real allegiance is to the all powerful prime minister.

The style of leadership where the initial objectives of nation building gets abandoned along the way and the entity becomes the safe haven for those safely protected from within seems to have been transmitted to those in charge at the UWI Mona Campus.

In recent years, I have written a few articles on the parlous state of the UWI Math Department. Other publications have chipped in. In the latest review of the UWI Mona Math Department (2006), one of the items in the summary states, 'The recommendations of the 2000 review are annexed as Appendix Three and most are distressingly similar to those being made six years later.' In other words, reviews were being done but, that was it. Absolutely no action!

The body has no head

The UWI Mona Math Department cannot find itself, nor can it summon the will to appoint a person to head it. Information has come to me that at the present time the powers that be are involved in frustrating another bright and superbly qualified recruit.

As I understand it, Dr Jonathan Farley, an African-American, graduated summa cum laude from Harvard University in 1991 with the second highest GPA in his graduating class. He scored 29 'A's and three 'A-'.

Professor Farley took his doctorate in Math from Oxford University in 1995 after winning its highest Math awards. But the professor was not just an egg head fit only for the classroom. Recently he solved a problem posed by MIT professor Richard Stanley that had remained unsolved since 1981.

He also solved a problem in 'transversal theory' (posed by Rado) that had remained unsolved for 33 years. If that was not enough, he also solved a problem from the Banff Conference on Graphs and Order that had remained unsolved for 22 years. Dr Farley is the real deal. In 2005, Seed Magazine named him as one of 15 people who have shaped the global conversation about science.

As I understand it, the 2004 agreement when Dr Farley was appointed as a professor of Mathematics at UWI Mona Campus in 2006 was that once he joined the faculty, the UWI Mona campus intended to ask him to assume headship of the department. Two years later, he is still there, and somehow the department feels justified to be limping along like a headless chicken.

The fact is, in numerous reports/review about the Math Department at Mona, the conclusions point to a seriously top heavy administration which seems not to have the interest nor the will to make the department the departure point for science and technology in the country.

If the case was one where the UWI Mona Campus was generally a brightly lit beacon producing the future actuaries, engineers, computer scientists and researchers in the hard sciences, then we could easily classify the problems in the Math Department as an anomaly on the radar screen on the institution at Mona. But that does not seem to be the case. A report titled A Skeletal Assessment of Mathematics at UWI Mona by Garth Baker, May 1989, paints a horrible picture not only of the UWI Math Department, but it hurls huge rocks at the UWI Mona campus as a whole.

Mediocrity is the UWI Mona campus' name

The assessment by Garth Baker should be made required reading for every person of leadership at the Mona Campus. Hopefully on reading the Baker assessment, most of the senior staff would be so shocked and so ashamed that it would move them towards affirmative action in making the University the grand place it was meant to be.

So moved was Baker by the rot he encountered that he quoted Roger Mais at the beginning of the report. From *Why I love and leave Jamaica*, the quote is, "There is in this country, alas, a moated tower of mediocrity, close and unassailable, and it holds such sway, it has acquired such a body of mediocre opinion about it that it is useless to try to make a dent in its smugness, and its exclusiveness, and its indifference to anything that does not come entirely within its limited scope and compass and influence."

In his introduction Baker states, 'The University, which should have become a centre of excellence, providing leadership intellectually, technically and culturally, steering the society away from mediocrity, has itself succumbed to the disease of mediocrity. This is the classical case of the fire station which, engulfed in its own incompetence, burned to the ground.'

As far as I am aware and based on other reports which have surfaced, not much has changed since that time in 1989. If anything, the society has grown coarser since 1989 and based on the near riots which have defined too many of the Guild elections at the UWI Mona Campus, the learning/teaching institution has been marching in step with the society, not playing a leading role.

Can we therefore criticise Perkins when he echoes the 'intellectual ghetto' bit?

Those who commissioned Garth Baker to conduct a study and report on his assessment of the Math Department should have hid the report from the media, if only to conceal their shame. It seems to me that Baker recognised that no proper assessment of the Math Department could be made without a critical assessment of the power structure ingrained in the UWI Mona Campus.

Baker listed three causes for the Campus' immersion in mediocrity. First he made mention of the 'authoritarian colonial structure of the institution'. He goes further, 'As opposed to

modern universities where the faculties enjoy an appropriate level of autonomy and are fully involved in running the institution along scientific norms, as is said openly on Campus, "UWI is run like a plantation".

The second cause is funding. Baker states, "The second catastrophe has been a chronic lack of appropriate funding of UWI by the regional governments... This is due to the lack of appreciation of these governments, of science, education and knowledge in general, in the process of development. This is in turn due to the pitiful cultural backwardness of the region's governments and ruling classes themselves, in comparison with their counterparts in other regions of the world."

Baker saved the 'best' for the last. "Entering into the moribund structure is the third and most virulent blow, the parasite which is the university administration and its suffocating bureaucracy. This administration which has been virtually unchanged for two decades is slow, isolated from the world of science and education, defensive and immune from criticism. It oversees the whole decaying structure of UWI with the cold detached indifference of a troop of grave diggers." Whew!

Said Baker to cap it all, "Its main agenda is the preservation of status and privilege; the task of education, scientific development and academic excellence has been abandoned. Operating very much like the civil service, it has underdeveloped the institution in order to rule it, with exclusivity. They have not invented anything; there is the shining example on a larger scale of Haiti."

Baker posited the view that until the three problem areas at the campus were dealt with, '...perhaps the Mathematics Department will acquire its true status on the planet, as an enormous ossified monument to neglect, underdevelopment and backwardness.'

Quality staff exists

In all of the reviews of the Math Department from 2000, 2003, 2004 and the last one I have seen in 2006, the headship of the department has been singled out as a special problem. None of the reviewers have dared to go where Baker went and one suspects that the reviewers were asked to stick to the Math Department and leave the top heavy structure in place, which simply means that it is highly unlikely that any meaningful change will occur.

Let me ask the University this. Why has Dr Farley not been made head of the department? Let me also ask. Is it not a fact that persons of the calibre of Dr Farley will often accept posts at the UWI Mona Campus at one-third the salaries they would normally be paid at universities in the USA and in Europe?

A few of these highly qualified, highly competent individuals are not just willing to swap the cold climate for sun all year round. Most see the transformation of the department as a challenging goal and, even more importantly, they tend to attract grant

funding from other universities and overseas foundations. Such high calibre personnel also attract other highly qualified faculty members who also attract grant funding.

So, what is holding back the university and the Math Department from making a decision on naming a head of the sort that I have described?

Once it gets out that a 'dysfunctional and anarchistic' Math Department is wont to break agreements with those who it hopes to retain until some semblance of a move in the right direction begins to click in, the word will be out in international academic circles that the UWI Mona Campus is a 'dibby dibby' university. At that stage, the only staff it will be able to recruit are those left on the pile.

No math research

Without a viable Math Department at the UWI Mona Campus, research in Mathematics is non-existent. The information I have is that Dr Farley would have brought in funding, not only for research, but to replace the archaic computer equipment in the Math Department.

I have also learned from reliable sources that the neo-colonial administration, that is, the untouchables in the upper echelons of the UWI Math Department, have ignored Dr Farley's written requests for clarification on a number of issues, including assistance with housing, obtaining a work permit and the situation concerning his being made head of the department. One senses that the Baker assessment of the colonial structure is still in place: '... It has underdeveloped the institution in order to rule it, with exclusivity.'

What is the sense of hiring Dr Farley, promising him head of the department, then not just going back on their word but now, actually frustrating him. Sources also tell me that Dr Farley is on the way out or has already left the UWI Math Department.

Strike up another victory for the authoritarian colonial structure of the UWI.

In making reference to research in the faculty of Math, Garth Baker said in his report, "Without doubt, the central problem of the Mathematics Department rests with the fact that it has never had a "critical mass" of active mathematicians at any time in its history. In fact only very rarely, and usually for very short periods of time, have there been any active mathematicians whatsoever in that department.

"By active mathematicians I mean people who are doing research, keeping up to date with the development of mathematics worldwide, and in their teaching, constantly trying to find new and more effective ways of communicating ideas and the "language" of mathematics; people who are ever trying to deepen their understanding of the field in a holistic fashion, and who try to see the connections between Mathematics and the vast world of science and culture."

Dr Farley was one of such persons and although, I have not been able to confirm it, I suspect that he also has been lost to the UWI Math Department.

There are reasons why some countries are wealthy and others mired in poverty like ourselves. While there will always be power games being played in institutions, wealthy countries tend to recognise which entities provide the butter for their bread and the future for their children.

Poor countries like Jamaica are filled with village tyrants whose main role is aping the 'massa' and consuming whatever goodwill there is to be found in institutions like the UWI Mona Campus.

In time we all pay a price for it. That time is now.

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