

## Development's Double Bifurcation: Reframing Caribbean-ACP, Commonwealth and EU Relations post-BREXIT

By David Gomez<sup>i</sup>



If the political leaders and heads of development organizations in the Caribbean, and perhaps in the other ACP (African-Caribbean-Pacific) regions as well, have not yet realized it BREXIT has left many of the countries - in particular those that were former colonies of Britain - with somewhat of a double bifurcation. Britain's turn now means that the relations Caribbean countries traditionally shared with the European Union (EU) must now give way not only to a reframing of relations with Britain vis-à-vis that with the EU (the first bifurcation), but also to redefining relations with the ACP as well as with the Commonwealth group of countries (the second bifurcation). When Britain acceded to the European Union two things happened: one, it necessarily meant that, to an extent, the nature of its historical relations with the Caribbean shifted from being that of former colonial master to that of 'development partner'; and two, the Caribbean found itself part of new political construct called the ACP. In the case of the former, this shift had the effect of relegating intra-Commonwealth relations to somewhat of a secondary status as the EU context definitely had primacy; and in the case of the latter, the creation of the ACP grouping now meant that British-Caribbean relations would be defined by the nature of Caribbean-EU relations (i.e. predominantly by trade). So what really does this mean for the Caribbean as a region and for individual Caribbean countries? Or rather, what needs to be taken into consideration in reframing its international relations with these groupings and with Britain itself?

In the case of the EU, there is a real need for the Caribbean to more closely examine not only the significance and value of the EU market for exports from the region but also how the trade landscape will look. Three scenarios are immediately evident: one,

the level and value of Caribbean trade with the EU is likely to decline significantly in the immediate post-BREXIT period - this is because the majority of Caribbean trade with the EU was really trade with Britain as part of the EU; two, for agriculture exports from the Caribbean (which comprises the bulk of trade with the EU) not only will these continue to be subject to the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) of the EU but they will also now be subject to whatever new agriculture policy is adopted by Britain - whether these will be aligned is anybody's guess at this point; and three, agricultural exporters in Britain will now be competing with those in the Caribbean for access to the EU market (the same may be true for fisheries trade and Britain has already signaled its intention to rebuild its domestic fishing industry as it moves to re-establish its exclusive economic zone). Given these likely scenarios the Caribbean urgently needs

to outline clear strategies for how it will pursue British versus EU economic relations. This will of course require that the political relations between Georgetown and Brussels also be redefined though at the moment it is difficult to imagine such relations not being predicated largely on economic and/or trade matters.

British-Caribbean relations will also need to be reframed. There is a need here to ensure that any discussions on what a future 'partnership' will look like are not derailed by the campaign from quarters within the region for reparations from slavery. The issue of responsibility for slavery is an important one in my view the discourse and the rhetoric needs to shift from reparations and towards framing a new scaffolding for funding development projects - its a different way of skinning the cat. Former British PM Cameron had on his visit to Jamaica in 2014 already signaled an interest in investing some 250 million pounds in infrastructure and other projects. Whether this is a priority for the new British PM and her government is something that cannot be left to chance but it is doubtful, given the recent shift in tide in Westminster, that there is much of an appetite for paying for such a legacy. Perhaps the region may find a more willing ear in outlining how assistance for addressing the social ills, rising crime, and weak linkages to global supply and value chains could help to reframe British-Caribbean relations. From that angle, the Caribbean may just be able to benefit from trade related technical assistance that ensures not only that it has continued access to Britain as a traditional market but also that new opportunities for FDI and non-traditional exports are created.

In the case of ACP, the Caribbean's membership and its participation here was directly a result of and, as mentioned above, was defined by British-EU relations. Prior to BREXIT the Caribbean relations with the ACP was largely framed within the context of wider British-EU relations and that is itself was predicated mainly on trade: first

under Lomé, then Cotonou and more recently under the EPA. This is likely to continue to be the case post-BREXIT but with Britain's impending departure from the Union there is a need for the Caribbean to recalculate how membership in this grouping can be leveraged in the future to ensure continued relevance that goes beyond development assistance and financing for Caribbean economies. In my opinion, the value of the ACP to Caribbean countries is in its potential as a political body, and hasn't delivered in terms of meaningful opportunities for trade. This is because of two things: the economic structure of Caribbean states; and the traditional character of intra-ACP trade. To be sure, the 'hope and hype' of markets in Africa and the Pacific for exports from the Caribbean have been just that - hope and hype. At a basic level there has historically been too much homogeneity in the composition of exports (i.e. countries in the region tended to export the same, often primary agricultural, products)

and too much similarity in the destination of exports. The real future value of the ACP to the Caribbean then will likely be found in securing decision-changing votes within UNCTAD, WTO and other international fora, on matters such as those related to climate change, among other things. That is not to discount the value of leveraging international value chains for Caribbean productive sectors that the ACP offers.

And finally, Caribbean-Commonwealth relations will need to be re-envisioned. It is not likely that the relationship with the Commonwealth group will assume primacy over that with either Britain or the EU but its value should certainly increase to rival if not surpass that of the ACP. The Commonwealth has sought to redefine its relevance recently (i.e. over the last few years) and it is likely that Britain will seek to enhance the utility and influence of this forum in the wider story-board of international relations. In the aftermath of the BREXIT vote Britain's International Trade Secretary reportedly pronounced on the opportunity to forge a new trade network (Hunt, 2017), giving some insights into how Britain perhaps intends to leverage this group, and the Commonwealth Secretariat has itself commissioned a number of policy briefs which have identified likely areas of impact and interest including achieving greater cooperation to undo de-risking and securing against possible economic shocks resulting from any slow down of the British economy should this happen. For the Caribbean, the Commonwealth presents a potential opportunity for reversing the region's slide towards the outer margins of the global economy and it therefore must be prepared to take advantage of any such opportunities.

The double bifurcation facing Caribbean development today is a complex one and the potential implications for Caribbean countries are likely to be significant. To ensure

that the development objectives of the region and of countries within the region are front and center going forward, the Caribbean must therefore strategically recalculate and refocus engagement with and from both London to Brussels. There is an opportunity here for forging new post-colonial relations along the first fork in the road (i.e. British-Caribbean and Caribbean-EU) and for doing so by forging new South-South relations (i.e. the ACP) while redefining the relevance of the Commonwealth and the EU to the Caribbean (the second fork in the road) but the trick is to do so without succumbing to the temptation of making this a post-colonial issue. The magic is to make this about reasserting the Caribbean's place in the global economy. Oh! but for that fork in the proverbial road to development

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