



Bespoke Homes Jamaica

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Spanish Town

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Dear Reader,

MAIL FROM JAMAICA (#1): CRIME

A curious thing happened recently. Something occurred that I had begun to fear might not be seen for a very long time. An age, some people thought. Forever, others bemoaned. But to read the news was a true breath of fresh air

I am of course talking about the recent crime figures for Jamaica. Crime across all main categories fell by 7 per cent in 2010. Murder fell by 15 per cent.

At the same time, Jamaican nationals in British prisons have been falling. One curious phenomenon got even more curious.

For falling crime in Jamaica, most commentators put Tivoli Gardens at the top of their list of explanations. According to this argument, the willingness of the security services to enter the Kingston neighbourhood in the way they did last May impacted on dons in other urban areas - as well as the harder core in the capital itself. Murder was down an incredible 35 per cent if we just look at May to January.

Many people - from the school gate to the supermarket line to the sports bar - believe our high crime rates to stem from poverty. Others say "what rubbish" - there was less crime 40 years ago and yet incomes were lower. What I see is some impact from income, but deeper things going on too.

Take income. It's more about jobs and job prospects. Forty or fifty years ago we made many more things, some that we exported and some that we used at home. Clothing is just one example: forty years ago, Kingston had factories making suits, shirts and other items. They employed hundreds and hundreds of people. Some towns and villages had

their own tailor, making or fixing clothes and employing a few people. Other examples are aplenty – from the plantation and small-holder farmers to furniture makers and the processing of sugar cane.

Those and other employers meant that our youngsters could look forward with some optimism to getting a job, whether before or after training. Now you just have to look at the empty buildings downtown. Or, look at the Kingston Container Terminal, stacked high with imports – not exports.

Well, you might say, we have new jobs – cellphone shops, higglers selling cellphone credit and doughnuts by every roadside, many more shops selling clothes, many more holiday hotels, many more cars (and aeroplanes) needing to be fixed. And you'd be right. Without the extra hotels, where would unemployment be?

Equally, without remittances, where would the cellphone culture be? For years before the credit crunch, remittances from Britain, Canada and USA grew strongly, year after year. Some of the unemployed could feed their children better and buy their school books. Others could buy a better cellphone and catch the route taxi to town. But did remittances gradually, year-by-year, give a growing number of Jamaicans a dependency culture? Has this even undermined productivity, worsening the chance of selling Jamaica-made goods and adding to unemployment? Some people think so.

With or without remittances, the plain fact is that unemployment is higher and job prospects worse than forty years ago. Some if not many youngsters worry about their prospects; some are totally disillusioned.

But income and job prospects are only a part of the picture. Other factors lie behind the growth in crime that we have witnessed over the last forty years.

Some blame parents. Some blame the government. Some blame society. Some even blame parts of our culture – the book “Man From Jamaica’s Hills” is very funny in parts – especially for adults; but Frank is a model rogue, many miles from being a role-model; and yet many schools still read the book to primary students.

How and what rules-come-boundaries that we all set and live by are, of course, crucial. Across the world, parents have wanted to give their children better than they had. And society has moved on from brutal physical punishment. But along the way we have tended to forget about setting boundaries within which youngsters must live their lives.

Entertainment on tv can blur the distinction between right and wrong. Perhaps Tivoli Gardens did have a big part in the better crime figures – a tough boundary was set and people have not wanted to cross it so much since.

And yet. If changing behaviour is worldwide, why is Jamaica's murder rate almost the worst in the world? Is there an innate "warrior" mentality, stemming from the particular tribe of warriors transported from western Africa all those years ago? Nanny, The Maroons, Sam Sharp: these were all warrior people, who fought to better themselves and their people. But they would have been strongly against larceny, burglary, extortion, bullying and murder. They would have wanted to set and live by firm boundaries – as long as they were just and seen to be just boundaries.

Maybe we are lacking a fair, honest, determined leader with clear vision of a better future? A modern-day person like our National Heroes. Or like Mandela; like Nehru; like Martin Luther King? Such a person might choose to build on Tivoli Gardens, whatever the outcome of the Manatt Enquiry. Without wanting to repeat security service killings on a large scale, the leader could make clear that dons and their gang activities will not be tolerated; that their organisations will be infiltrated and broken. All citizens would have a right to a decent education and help with finding work - more jobs following less crime; but with the responsibility to learn how to become a better parent and how to respect other citizens.

Such a leader, Jamaica's Mandela, would also want to lead all citizens to adopt a set of values for the twenty-first century, building on what some still remember from The Bible. Building also on Jamaica's existing, profound National Pledge: *"Before God and all mankind, I pledge the love and loyalty of my heart, the wisdom and courage of my mind, the strength and vigour of my body in the service of my fellow citizens; I promise to stand up for Justice, Brotherhood and Peace, to work diligently and creatively, to think generously and honestly, so that Jamaica may, under God, increase in beauty, fellowship and prosperity, and play her part in advancing the welfare of the whole human race."*

Let's not go around thinking "if only dem wud stop dem crime". Let's all remember the National Pledge. Let's all try to become the Jamaican Mandela, day in, day out. It's down to each and every one of us. Together we can begin to make a difference.

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