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Dear Reader,

Letter from Jamaica No. 11

Jamaicans flourishing in British business?

Word has it that Jamaicans living in Britain don't bother with business and enterprise. Whereas our brethren on the rock, in Canada and in the USA are much more entrepreneurial. Or so the story goes. Can it really be true?

Well, it's an argument mentioned last year as part of the Independence celebrations by chairman of GraceKennedy, Douglas Orane. Arguably Britain being the first destination for early migrants made a big difference. Many such persons were poor and from rural areas. So many had relatively little education and little experience of business. The exact opposite of those who went to Canada some years later. While migrants to the US were more mixed, the fact that many persons travelled there meant there would be quite a few success stories.

Persons moving to Britain in the 1940s – 1960s are seen as only wanting a “nine-to-five job”. They wanted their children to get educated and to become lawyers and doctors. Business was far too risky. As Dr Herbert Gayle at UWI has said: “Jamaicans from working class backgrounds in the UK are not poor enough to be needs-based entrepreneurs...and not from a background to be opportunity-based, therefore the nine-to-five job attitude predominates in the group”.

If true sixty years ago, is it still true?

Well, it is true that many Jamaicans on the island are quite entrepreneurial. Half of adults are self-employed. In Gayle-terms, many are “needs-based entrepreneurs”. Like the persons trying to sell you a steering-wheel cover or freshly roasted nuts before the traffic light changes colour.



Others have made fortunes by seeing and pursuing opportunities. The Jamaican Fred W. Kennedy partnered with the American Dr John Grace in the 1920s. Gordon Stewart



pioneered all-inclusive holidays. Jukie Chin raises cattle and sells to all Juici restaurants across the island. Patrick Casserly started his call centre business in 2000 and sold it nine years later for US\$100 million. Other big achievers include the Mahfood family, the Matalons, the Issa family, Kamala Bennett, Lascelles Chin, Wayne Chen, Richard Azan, Gassan Azan Jr. and Tony Brown.

For Canada, the billionaire Michael Lee Chin, of Portland Holdings Inc., stands out. Also Richard Chang's wealth management firm, Investments Inc.

For the US, a shining example is Lowell Hawthorne, founder of the Golden Krust chain of more than 120 restaurants. Vincent and Patricia Chin at VP Records also impress. As also does a "new breed of entrepreneurs". Youngsters born in Jamaica but growing up in the USA, like Richard Powell and Franz Alphonze.

Before we turn to Britain, let's dwell for a moment on how we detect an entrepreneur. It's quite easy. Because many have a vision and take action to get there. They take risk. They put down their own money – be it much or little. To back their vision of how things can change. They trust their judgement of how far their brethren will want to buy their new idea.

But isn't that just what happens over and over in Britain? Not quite, as some see things. Many skilled Jamaicans are seen in the caring professions. Lots delivering social services. Or as heads of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and CBOs (community-based organisations). Not as heads of small or larger businesses.

A Guardian journalist, Hugh Muir, witnessed the lack of Jamaican-run shops as a youngster in the suburbs of London. He ran errands to a corner shop operated by "a red-faced bear of an Englishman...always barking". In contrast to the lack of Jamaican shops, Muir highlighted the way East European shops have spread like wildfire since their countries joined the EU in 2004. So, maybe there's more to this than I thought?

Well, I'm still not all that convinced. Maybe detailed figures will show me to be wrong – though I haven't found any yet. What I have seen is a vast array of bakeries, restaurants, bars and cafes spread across much of England. Okay, not many corner shops. But some businesses were established quite early – like the Old Trafford Bakery in Manchester (1960) and the Sunrise Bakery in Birmingham (1966). First Choice Bakers and First National Bakery started in the 1990s.

Jamaican restaurants and cafes appear in many towns. Oxford's Hi Lo Eating House dates back to the recessionary year of 1981. Bristol has a host of restaurants – like Beverley

Forbes' Plantation Restaurant, Rice and Things, Jammin's Jamaica Cuisine and Gordon's Caribbean. Northampton has at least three Jamaican restaurants. Edinburgh's Coyaba Restaurant remains incredibly popular after years of trading. Huddersfield's Discovery Bay goes from strength to strength. Derby has Caribbean Island Restaurant and at least three others. While there are many, many take-aways, Cummin Up now has a chain of them.

Across London Jamaican restaurants are easy to find. There's the Taste of Jamaica in Harold Wood. The Hummingbird in Finsbury Park. One Stop in Harlesden. Bamboulah in Brixton. Brown Sugar in Clapham. More recently there are the more gourmet Port Royal in Lavender Hill, the Mango Room in Kentish Town and Freshh in Camden. Plus many more.

We are now seeing an increasing move toward higher value goods and services. Like Marvia Borrell's Black River Chocolate, itself attracting worldwide interest at international food fairs, including recent ones in Germany and Japan. Wilfred Emanuel Jones' success with Black Farmer products is already well known. Similarly with Levi Roots' sauces and ready meals.



The many bars range from Heritage Inn of Cricklewood to The Bagot Arms of Wolverhampton. A number of funeral homes have been established by Jamaicans. Similarly for shipping companies. One or two companies will even repatriate the dead to Jamaica. There are travel companies, like Beverley Lindsay's Diamond Travel. There is Junior Douglas' Dees Imports. Various mechanics' shops will fix your car. Garfield Robinson's Promoting Our Heritage will sell you books and other heritage items. Lorlett Hudson's One Hand Can't Clap will – like many other Jamaican-run coaching businesses – help you get focused and remain so. Denis St Bernard's Caribbean Enterprise Network can provide market intelligence and business facilitation services; and could help with your enterprise plans. And then there is the newspaper created by Val McCalla, which is still keeping us informed – The Voice.

I could go on and on. There are theatres in some major towns that are mostly run/used by Jamaicans. There are major churches established and run primarily by Jamaicans, like New Testament Church of God and RUACH.

All of which suggests to me that the last 20-30 years has seen increasing entrepreneurial activity by Jamaicans living in Britain. Perhaps we did largely miss running the corner shop in many places. But now we certainly are doing many other forms of business. And yet I haven't even mentioned at least two of the mega outfits created here. Dyke and Dryden started off in 1968 selling records from Jamaica. But soon it transformed the hair, skin-care and cosmetics products for black persons in the UK. Around the same era, Chris Blackwell

developed Island Records. Both truly mega companies. And the annual Black Hair and Beauty Show started by Dyke and Dryden continues to this day.

Some persons have argued that Jamaicans don't succeed in British business owing to a "crabs in a barrel" mentality. Our experience at Bespoke Homes Jamaica is of Jamaicans across England helping each other to succeed. Sharing knowledge and experience. Offering support and tips on how to progress. Offering real business help. Coaching each other. Advising each other. Crabs spreading out from the barrel, arm in arm.

All of this seems to me like a vast range of entrepreneurial activity going on in Britain. By Jamaicans. Okay, it's far less than the half of adults we see on the island. But that's because lots of persons don't have to survive by selling phone credit and pickled shrimps by the roadside. Being a higgler is not that straightforward in Britain. But there is still lots of enterprise going on.

If you want to get started in business, Douglas Orane offers some very useful advice. Like his tips for beginning a business. Start by building up a good record with your bank, saving regularly. Plan to use capital that you have saved, or that is invested by relatives and friends. And, as I said in Letter from Jamaica number 9 on how to get a house in Jamaica, "plan, plan and plan".

A saying by Douglas Orane is also invaluable, not just for the budding entrepreneur:

*Vision without action is merely a dream;
Action without vision merely passes the time;
Vision with action can change the world.*

And Mr Orane has some great advice, borrowed from Jimmy Cliff: "You can get it if you really want...try and try, you'll succeed at last". Ever more of us will succeed at business as time goes by.

Finally, I mention that I have started compiling a list of Jamaican businesses across Britain. Please tell me of any you know of: stuart@bespokehomesjamaica.com.

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3 July 2013

PS. If you enjoyed this Letter from Jamaica, please forward to friends - and encourage them to register by emailing me. Thanks, Stuart

References

Douglas Orane: UK Diaspora Lecture at the Jamaican High Commission, 16 May 2012

Hugh Muir: Hideously diverse Britain: advice for the UK's Jamaican diaspora to set store by; UK Observer, 27 May 2012