

Letter from Jamaica, 7 July 2011

Last Sunday evening I met a man by Kingston harbour with a fish in his hand. “Dis mi meal – jus catch. Mi beg a hundred dollar fi mi get a flour” said John Brown, a man of sixty years or so with a grey beard. We chatted a while with the sea at our feet and then went our ways.

Soon after John left, he got me thinking. What was that saying about fish? Yes, “give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for a life”. He begged; yet, he had caught the fish. I saw the hook in its mouth. He got me thinking some more, but I remained a little puzzled.



Two days later. A Spanish Town hardware store. I tipped the disabled guy who directs traffic from the car park. He has no job; he lives off tips. Has done for six years as I know – and perhaps much longer. He hobbles a mile to “work” with his stick; and back again at day end. After I tipped him, I couldn’t help noticing that the well-dressed customer in the line behind me begged \$20 from the disabled man – only to turn it down at the prospect of lots of single dollars! I remembered some time ago the roadworks signal man who begged his lunch money while I waited in line and had to admit he was a paid employee.

Okay, it’s true that minimum wage of \$4,700 (£36) per week is impossibly low – though not quite as bad as being one of the 13% unemployed.

And, of course, a country that spends more than half its tax revenue on debt interest can barely afford any welfare benefits. How after all can an 85 year-old pensioner live on the government’s \$1,200 (£9.25) a month?

Sure, the sending of remittances has helped people to survive. But has it perhaps also encouraged more begging? I don’t know – it’s all very difficult.

What about other sorts of gifting? Well, I’m always reading about how one group or another in Britain, America or Canada has just raised money for a

hospital or school in Jamaica. And, for example, the annual ball of the Basic School Foundation in London always attracts hundreds of people, even at £100 per head.

Then there's philanthropists, be they in Jamaica or in foreign. Be they big or small. People like Usain Bolt or Gordon Stewart. Or the many unknown individuals who pay for things like Saturday school for a handful of children somewhere on the island.

What about charity shops? The sort in England that have gone from almost none thirty years ago to several on every high street across the country. Would many people in Jamaica be too proud to use them? Would they prefer just a few designer brands as long as they were new? Are there enough people in Jamaica who would give things away beyond their immediate family? Would more of the Diaspora send more clothes and other things if charity shops existed in Jamaica? Are there enough low rent outlets for charity shops to be able to work? I don't know; maybe you do?

Of course, Food For The Poor continues to do great work. As also the Salvation Army, the Red Cross and others. And the UN, the EU, western governments and now Asian ones too try to help. The charities help individuals – if they can find them. And they all try to help hospitals, schools, water, roads etc – though often too little, too late, I suspect.

But how could the Diaspora help Jamaica and its residents even more than they already do? Facilitators For A Better Jamaica (FFBJ) recently polled its members about how best to help Jamaica. Most said by investing there. A middle group said by returning. The smallest group favoured remittances.

Maybe my fisherman friend is after all blazing a trail, if only he knew it? If only we knew it. In reality, he's the "mixed economy" that we often hear politicians talk of – or he's a bit like the "John Lewis" method, of "co-operation". Or, perhaps he's more like Britain's "working tax credit" – where people on low pay work but get a little help from better off folks. John Brown did a big thing, by learning to fish – and going out there and doing it. But he still needs "a lickie ting" to make his life work.

Perhaps that's it! Perhaps those of us living in foreign who are keen enough should commit to pay the Jamaica government so much a year if they will use the money to create a sort of working tax credit for low paid people here? Perhaps that could be part of a deal on dual citizenship/voting rights? A lot of "perhaps-es"! Could they be made to work? Tough; but where there's a will, there's a way. Or, perhaps we just live with begging?

Any which way: I lift my hat to John Brown – and I'm so glad I gave him my ninety dollars.

Stuart Taylor
Spanish Town

stuart@bhj-ltd.com