

The Political and Trade Union Divide

The decision of a trade unionist to enter into elective politics is often met with push back in some quarters. Those who are uncomfortable with the decision, tend to be very uncharitable in their comments, as they ascribe several motives to the move. Some can be very disingenuous, given that they draw conclusions which are based on a lack of information, unfounded perceptions they have of the individual and on their partisan political preference. Those trade unionists who are bold enough to seek political office, can expect to be ridiculed by those who will accuse them of having betrayed the cause of labour.

It can be argued that those who think in this way, share a narrow and myopic view of what trade union representation is all about. It would seem that they are holding fast to what have been defined and accepted as the principal purposes and roles of the trade union. It has been established that the trade union is expected to negotiate wages and terms and conditions of work, engage in the process of collective bargaining, regulate relations between workers and the employer, represent the interest and welfare of workers and to engage in dispute settlement. The issue of divided loyalty is one that apparently raises fears and reservations on the part of those who are pessimistic about any partisan political association. What matters most of all, is the ability of a trade unionist as an elected politician, to be able to separate their loyalty to the political party and to that of the trade union.

The legitimacy of the fears that are held in some quarters, cannot be dismissed as frivolous or without merit. These fears can be erased where upon the trade union-politician is able to demonstrate that they hold strong to the fundamental principles of truth, honesty, transparency, accountability and the right to make decisions that are based on good conscience and on what is right or wrong. What must stand head and shoulders above these, is the integrity and character which the individual presents. The question of the respect for workers' rights, human rights, and civil liberties, should not be in question, as to suggest otherwise, would be providing good reasons for the condemnation of any practicing trade unionist-politician.

Trade unionists like every other member of society, have the right to contest elections for political office. This is a preserve which obtains within all democratic societies and Commonwealth countries. The freedom of choice and the right to associate are constitutional rights to which all are entitled. The difficulty which those

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trade unionists who are elected to serve in the Parliament on a ticket of a political party are most likely to face, is that of having to manage how they are able to serve the interest of their political party, alongside that of the constituents of the trade union. There is the potential for the individual to be caught between a rock and a hard place. This could result in the individual compromising his/her self when called upon to make hard decisions on courses of action to be taken, which in one way or another, run into conflict with the policy directions and agenda of the trade union.

This calls for a balancing act. It can be achieved once the individual can exercise a sense of objectivity, sound reasoning and good judgements. The individual who places self interest above everything thing else, is egocentric and engages in the game of pretense, where upon he/she acts when it suits the attention of one interest group over the other, is certainly courting self-destruction. This inevitability could be avoided if trade unionist as a parliamentary representative, is clear in the agenda that they are required to promote on behalf of their trade union constituents. This is in addition to having an understanding of their obligation to promoting and protecting the interest and welfare of their political constituents and the citizenry of the nation.

It sounds all well and good when trade unionists who are entering the political arena, attempt to justify their participation by voicing that they are doing so on behalf of the trade union membership. While the intention may be good, it is not inconceivable that unless the move is sanctioned by the membership, the fallout can be greater than anticipated. To avoid the level of divide and for the peace of mind of the leader as a prospective political candidate, it is best that the trade union membership endorses any participation in the elective politics; having engaged the democratic process where balloting is done, and a majority vote is attained. This should be the precursor to gaining approval for the use of union dues for the support of any political activity which might follow.