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The History of Brain Drain in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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Men trying to catch brains flying with wings. By. GETTY IMAGES

Frank Crosswaith was born in 1872 in Frederiksted. He immigrated to the United States in his teens. He attended the Rand School of Social Science. In 1925, he founded an organization called the "Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers." He later accepted a position as an organizer for the "Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters" in association with A. Phillip Randolph, the great civil rights leader.

This brilliant native Crucian, like many others, never comes back home; thus begins a long history of "brain drain" in the Virgin Islands. However, their circumstances and "time periods" compared to what we are facing today might seem paradoxical.

According to Asyenafi Gedamu in an article entitled: "Causes and Consequences of Brain Drain," there are three reasons. These reasons are: (1) people migrate due to lack of employment and low salaries, and thus people are tempted to look for better salaries elsewhere; (2) political instability in their home countries, thus they lose confidence in their governments and future prospects for a better life. These are individuals who may have difficulties because of their ethnic, cultural, religion, belongings or being a member of opposition political groupings in their home countries; and (3) many scholars who have been sent abroad for further studies or who are once out, in one way or another, remain abroad, leaving their family and workplace behind with the hope that a better life can be achieved elsewhere, despite their well-being at home.

"The World Migration In Figures" published a statistical report that said in 2010, close to 90% of university educated and highly skilled people born in Guyana lived in OEDC countries. OEDC is the "Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development," a unique forum where the governments of 34 democracies with market economies, work with each other, as well as with more than 70 non-member economies to promote economic growth, prosperity, and sustainable development.

The report further went on to say that the proportion of highly educated people residing in OECD countries was also significant for Jamaica (46%), Tonga (46%), Zimbabwe (43%), Mauritius (41%), the Republic of Congo (36%), Belize (34%), and Fiji (31%).

For the people of the Virgin Islands, although the colonial occupation of Denmark might have played a significant role in Harrison's and Grosswaith's migrating to the United States, theirs were insignificant to the massive migration that took place since the adaptation of the 1954 Organic Act and the causes behind it, which, as usual, provided no statistical information for references, so we can only speculate based upon our historical knowledge.

If one should speculate then, it could be justified that one of the causes for Harrison and Grosswaith's leaving the Virgin Islands for educational and possible economic opportunities was the drainage from the "Emancipation of 1848" and the "Fire Burn" of 1878. The conditions under which the children of slavery had to survive were dismal in that time, both economically and educationally, which was blatant and avoidable. However, since 1954 to present time, we could speculate with a sense of certainty that approximately 46% of the Virgin Islands population has migrated to the only OECD country available to them—the United States.

My concerns are the impact of brain drain on the Virgin Islands as a whole. Well, according to John Wilmoth, Director, United Nation's Development of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the impact of brain drain, especially on small developing countries with relatively few highly skilled workers, is the loss of human capital, which affects the provision of basic services, drains fiscal resources, and reduces economic growth.

In the past decades, the numbers of highly educated and skilled migrants from the Virgin Islands to the United States have been rising significantly. Why? First of all, it is not because of political instability or because the Virgin Islands is a war-torn zone; rather, it is because of these unfortunate factors: lack of employment and low salaries, and, sadly for an island under the canopy of democracy, opposition political groupings.

We in the Virgin Islands cannot attract highly qualified doctors, nurses, or teachers because of low salaries. Many of our young Virgin Islanders who have left for the "mainland," refused to come back home because of the meager salaries being offered. Some also realized that there is little to no employment available for the sacrifice they have made in acquiring job skills and educational

training they could not get at home.

Of the many negativities caused by brain drain, none is more debilitating than “opposition political groupings,” especially in a small place like the Virgin Islands. In this society, children who are born into political privilege are often seen as the “chosen few.”

The chosen few are those parents’ brothers, sisters, or cousins who control the political atmosphere and, through the process of elimination, make their way to the future “promise land” with unbounded opportunities for family connection and “big shot names.” In being a small place, those who are left behind have no choice but to find privileges elsewhere; in the case of the Virgin Islands, this means the United States. This kind of brain drain is prevalent in small places.

Another, which is unique to the Virgin Islands, is the election of the heads of government. In this case, the person or persons who are elected as Governor or legislators will completely eliminate those employees of the opposition and or those employees the elected sees as non-supporters during the election process. In retrospect, these employees are oftentimes replaced with older supporters, thus creating a bombardment to younger and more educated individuals seeking employment.

The Virgin Islands is unique in the sense that it is an American Territory and most of its inhabitants are American citizens in more ways than many of the other OECD countries. Therefore, where migration of the highly educated is not just a process of brain drain, contributing to the loss of professionals required for national development at home; but governed fairly, it can enhance socio-economic progress both in countries of origin and destination.

However, and unfortunately, in the Virgin Islands, the above mentioned are not encouraged. Many who have come home are rebuffed, discouraged by the systematic structure and bureaucratic red tape jungle they have to pass through to be accepted or employed. It is said, in the Virgin Islands, the worst personality trait to have is ambition. It is a defeating trait.

In regard to brain drain in these Virgin Islands, we need to seriously look into what kind of society we are creating towards a better future. For example, according to the World Bank, only one-quarter of nurses in the English-speaking Caribbean remain working in their countries. The rest go to work abroad, where working and living conditions are significantly better.

In the time of Crosswaith, when he had decided to leave the Virgin Islands to better himself in the United States, he said he was going “abroad.” In his effort, he made history and became a contributor to a country that was not his own.

Submitted on Sunday, Sept. 11, 2022 by: *Winston Nugent, a native of Spanish Town, Jamaica, who grew up on St. Croix. In 1975, he won the first College of the Virgin Islands poetry award. He has been honored by The International Society of Poets. Blue Rain, Negus, On Our Island, and Walking in the Footsteps of My Ancestors are among his poetry chapbooks. The following short stories have been published by the University of the Virgin Islands (Caribbean Writer): Two Birds With One Stone, Many Rivers to Cross, and Still Water Runs Deep. He received The Caribbean Writer’s Marguerite Cobb McKay Prize and The Daily News Prize for the story "The Rim," which was published in The Caribbean Writer Volume 33.*