Stop the corruption

By Richard Braithwaite

THE year 2014 has arrived and with it comes the hopes and dreams of millions around the world for a better life. In T&T a fervent wish is that the billions of dollars that continue to flow through the Treasury will have a more positive impact on the quality of life that citizens enjoy. It is not an unreasonable request given the huge revenues that accrue on an annual basis all of which supposedly belong to the people.

In a country where $6 million can be spent on wrecking a single fire truck it should be easy to find money for those projects and activities that really add value to life in T&T.

Take the perennial issue of flooding, a problem that plagues several communities every time there is heavy rainfall. Surely in the high-tech 21st century there must be modern methods to deal decisively with this problem especially when money is no problem. Millions of dollars seem readily available for non-essentials while many selfless, hardworking community groups and NGOs continue to struggle for financial support. A similar fate often befalls our artists, writers and musicians whose works are critical if we are to avoid the abyss. Along with our social workers and guidance counsellors these are the persons who should be commanding the million-dollar fees, not only lawyers.

While the wasteful, inefficient spending is bad enough it is also an unpleasant fact that a significant portion of the national patrimony is stolen and ends up in private bank accounts outside T&T. Just a few weeks ago in a CCN-TV6 interview political analyst Derek Ramsamooj stated that "corruption has become institutionalised. What we have are carpetbaggers trying to take as much as possible from the state without putting in anything".

This culture of kickbacks is not new and Ramsamooj noted that some people enter politics not to serve the public but to acquire personal wealth and power. And in a July 2012 article in the T&T Review entitled “Setting moral boundaries”, UWI lecturer Dr Samuel Lochan wrote “from our leaders down the example is one of greed, self-interest and corruption without inhibition or shame.” It should be no surprise, therefore, that Trinidad and Tobago continues to fall in the annual Corruption Perception Index despite the platitudes about transparency and accountability. The apologists are quick to point out that it is only a “perception” and not the reality. Yeah right.

Citizens should certainly expect that with the massive amounts of money passing through the country and the widespread concern about corruption, one of the more active and powerful agencies would be the Financial Intelligence Bureau. After all, this is the arm of the Financial Intelligence Unit that is responsible for investigating and prosecuting white collar criminals. Yet, according to local anti-money laundering expert David West, the FIB “is understaffed and lacks the training and expertise.”

In the same CCN-TV6 interview West lamented that “over $600 million worth of suspicious transactions have been reported yet there have been no prosecutions”. Why is this? Who benefits from having a weak and ineffective FIB?

Meanwhile the chairman of the local Transparency Institute Deryck Murray makes the point that “when we talk about criminal activities we think about drug-related gangs and people who shoot each other, but there are other forms of corruption”. Indeed there are but the white-collar criminals who control the drug trade, import the guns, organise the diesel racket and invest in human trafficking somehow manage to escape the scrutiny that is reserved for other sectors of the society. Almost 20 years ago David Rudder sang that “somebody letting the cocaine pass”. What has happened since then?

The real danger however, lies in the havoc that corruption inevitably weaks on the nation’s moral compass.
As the money disappears from the Treasury so too our sense of right and wrong. It is no mere coincidence that the rising tide of financial skullduggery coincides with brutal murders in broad daylight and the slaughter of innocent children. Not to mention the upsurge in fake university degrees.

These are all signs of social decay and the anything goes mentality that prevails in a corrupt society.

The deterioration has been evident for many years but some have excused the decline with self-serving phrases like “politics has a morality of its own” or “all ah we t’ief”. Others claim that corruption is no big thing and that Trinbagonians secretly admire “smartmanism”. If this is true then why are people getting so angry and why do the swindlers engage in such elaborate schemes to cover their tracks and hide the stolen money?

In an article following the International Anti-Corruption Conference in Brazil in 2012, Akaash Maharaj who visited Trinidad recently, wrote that “political corruption robs people of their own resources and fundamental rights”. The Executive Director of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption added that corruption “makes the weak prey to the strong and it delivers control of society into the hands of the unjust. It debilitates the nation and undermines the rule of law”. In other words it is a major cause of lawlessness and social injustice.

Echoing similar sentiments, World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim recently stressed that “in the developing world, corruption is public enemy number one. Every dollar that a corrupt official or a corrupt business person puts in their pocket is a dollar stolen from a pregnant woman who needs health care or from a girl or a boy who deserves an education or from communities that need water, roads and schools”. Whenever frustrated citizens take to the streets, burning tyres to protest the lack of amenities in their community, they should remember the words of Mr. Kim.

So while the nation waits patiently for comprehensive procurement legislation and an unrelenting assault on white-collar crime, I join with thousands of citizens in making a special request for 2014……stop “t’iefing” the people’s money.

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When senior cabinet ministers rub shoulders and protect one of the most corrupted individual from being tried for corruption it will never stop. By being present with him it shows that they don’t care about morality. Remember the old adage “show me your friends and i will tell you who you are”.

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