

## COMMENTARY

# Politicians and pan

**THE TRINITY CROSS** award to Pan Trinbago pays tribute, however imprecise, to the work of that 16-year-old organisation, but it also signals another blessing benignly bestowed by the State in the general direction of pan.

This evidence of yet another gesture to appease the nation's presumably-troubled conscience about pan will be gratefully added to the scrapbooks of the many retainers of what is called the "steelband movement."

The Trinity Cross will thus now find a place alongside such other symbols as the pan motif on the tailfins of BWIA jets. Such heraldic representation of pan still falls short of Edgar Whaley's 1985 proposed redesign of the national coat of arms with a pan at the crest.

But if that one can't yet be credited to the allegedly in-arrears account of pan recognition, certainly the incorporation of Pan Trinbago, by Act No. 5 of 1986, should have served as reassurance that the nation's heart is in the right place.

### Ungracious Remarks

Well, not necessarily, it would seem. On the occasion of the introduction of the Incorporation Bill, Pan Trinbago President, Arnim Smith, was heard to make some at least ungracious remarks about the sponsoring Minister, Hugh Francis. Independence anniversary, 1987, found Mr Francis ruminating in the sourness of defeat; Pan Trinbago, meanwhile, was being feted by a new Government. Somewhere in there, if only crudely illustrated, lies a cautionary tale about the political potency of pan.

The Independence messages of Minister A.N.R. Robinson and of Opposition Leader Patrick Manning showed that both have got the message. In almost identical terms, the two leaders paid homage to pan as "the only musical instrument invented this century."

And in case they might have forgotten to do so, Mr Smith was on hand to remind the nation, in an interview that weekend, that "Trinidad and Tobago has created the only music instrument of the twentieth century."

The PNM Government had set up a National Steel Orchestra which, with its uniforms and pans in the national colours, was there to serenade our nation's dawning.

Twenty-five years later, as the NAR Government gives the highest national honour to Pan Trinbago, politicians still think it smart to position themselves on the right side of the pan question.

The right side of the pan question is actually the left one. For 30 years—and, apparently, nine months—there has been acknowledgement of a national debt to pan, to discharge which is thought to be a legitimate obligation of the State.

Although in practice, the State has often shown pan little more than benign neglect, this is seen as part of a more general dereliction of duty, rather than a specific repudiation of pan's claim to wardship.

Implicit in that burgeoning book of soulful songs about pan—from Sparrow's "Outcast" through Black Stalin's "Wey I Band" to Boogsie Sharpe's "Pan Must Progress"—is an accusation against the State, or a challenge to the State to do something, or something more, for pan.

### National Pride

Pan is both a source of national pride and a cause of national self-reproach: such is the ambivalence of the attitudes set in place early in the PNM era, enduring today even as the State is set to shrink the scope of its responsibility.

In huge numbers, people still make the annual votive pilgrimage to Panorama, and then spend the rest of the year in remorse and confusion over what they feel is a national failure to make something of pan.

Panorama suggests that pan is a resource in oversupply. As with mangoes, watermelons and chenettes in season, there seems an obvious case for further processing and marketing of the abundant pan harvest.

And it's here that the pan question gets confused with the large needs for both a viable export product and for a durable basis of national self-esteem. "I feel that music is the oil of the 1990s, and we can make so much revenue from it," said David Rudder, when he was being celebrated for celebrating the hammer-wielding prowess of the late Rudolph



ARNIM SMITH  
a reminder

Charles.

Somehow, it's believed that pan, as the centrepiece of Trinidad music, if properly exploited, could bring a lot more foreign exchange, or at least yield more psychic dividends in national self-fulfillment.

And so, the distinction of pan as the only musical instrument created in the last 87 years has gained the status of an article of patriotic faith.

Rev. John Sewell once observed that Italians no longer claim that they invented the piano. And

it's worth noticing that Italians have since had a few export successes in Fiat cars, Gucci shoes, and pasta.

National pan boosterism toned down a little, it might also be noticed that modern electronics has produced in the synthesiser a machine, if not a musical instrument, technically capable of conjuring up the sound of pan, or something acceptably close to it.

Thus, technology threatens to flood the market with substitutes, even before the pan export business—long-dreamed of here—has begun its "product cycle."

### Factory Plans

The Trinity Cross probably rewards Pan Trinbago's contribution to keeping such dreams alive. Arnim Smith has said his organisation plans to set up a pan factory, pan archives, a headquarters for Pan Trinbago, and a hotel for its guests.

The suspicion that such plans are more a wish list than an agenda for action seems justified by what Mr Smith has said elsewhere about his organisation.

When Textel backed out recently of funding the Schools' Steelband Festival, Mr Smith refused to read into that development any salutary lesson about self-reliance.

"We are a cultural organisation and