

ML 1040

OUR OPINION

Do we really need a pan factory?

TRINIDAD and Tobago does not have a steelband factory because there is no demand for one. That can be the only conclusion to be drawn after so many years of fruitless discussion on the issue.

Industry and Enterprise Minister Ken Gordon noted recently that Trinidad and Tobago had not yet realised the commercial and industrial possibilities of the invention and went further to call on participants at a technological seminar to consider a strategy for Trinidad and Tobago to "capitalise on this innovative and indigenous art form."

The participants might well have begun with the strategy that is already in place. Four years ago—April 12, 1984, to be exact—then Minister of Culture Marilyn Gordon pledged her government's commitment to a pan factory, plans for which, she said, were on the drawing board and which were "coming along."

Indeed, in December, 1983, Pan Trinbago's president, Arnim Smith, CAR-IRI mechanical engineer Richard McDavid and pan-tuner Bertie Marshall travelled to Sweden where they looked at technology with an eye to beginning mechanisation of the steelband industry. Five years later not a hammer has been struck and the pan factory, like so many things Trinidadian, turned out to be a nine-day wonder. Except that somewhere in some government or Pan Trinbago vault those drawing-board plans that Mrs Gordon spoke about must still exist.

Will the present Minister of Culture, Jennifer Johnson, revive those plans in the wake of Minister Gordon's call and in light of Trinidad and Tobago's pressing need to develop products for export?

Curiously, even Pan Trinbago seems to have

given up on the issue. While, in the end, relations between Pan Trinbago and the Chambers government deteriorated, we are not aware that the organisation sought to win this administration's backing for the factory.

So that means there must be \$400,000 lying down in some bank somewhere since that was the sum garnished from the panmen's Panorama pay-packets in 1983 and 1984. It represented Pan Trinbago's own financial commitment to the factory, the organisation, even then, seeking to stand on its own two feet.

There has always been a school of thought opposed to a pan factory. A school of romantics who believe that the present laborious method is part of the steelband legend. But the truth is the absence of mechanisation has led to increasing manufacturing costs which, in turn, have raised the cost of starting and maintaining a steelband.

It has been argued, as well, that a factory would put tuners out of work. But the reality is that given the correct international marketing, the factory would require more rather than fewer tuners and would assist in putting on an export footing what is, perhaps, the one industry really indigenous to Trinidad and Tobago.

All these arguments are well known and like the pan factory idea have been around for years. Pans, however, continue to be made, steelbands seem to be fully supplied and the factory remains inoperative. What this suggests is that there is no real demand for a pan factory, that we prefer the industry to continue as it has been going and, unless this administration is able to inject new dynamism into the proposals, that status quo will be maintained for a very long time.