

First Conference on Hirschman's Legacy: Theory and Practice

L. Amede Obiora, *Intersecting Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Feedback from Nigeria* – Précis

On June 13, 2006, I heard from a journalist that President Obasanjo announced my nomination to serve as a Minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I had no forewarning, interest, or preparation for this. On June 19, I met the President the first time in my life. In context over breakfast, he asked what personality trait appealed most to me. I said “courage.” He asked, “why not loyalty?” I affirmed they were not mutually exclusive, but that courage was of immediate higher order for me. For much of my tenure as his cabinet executive, I enjoyed his unequivocal support. Subsequently, we disagreed on an issue that I deemed determinative, so I resigned on principle. My decision was not readily reconcilable in a worldview that prioritized loyalty. However, my work with him post-office left him in no doubt about my loyalty to Nigeria. I will elaborate on these experiences to illuminate some instructive insights into the complexities of the relationship between exit, voice and loyalty.

For me, “voice” integrated “exit” and enlivened “loyalty”. As reflected in the background attachment, I did not default to exit because deeply entrenched vested interests sought to thwart reform initiatives I rolled out to pipeline structures and processes that will help nurture the enabling environment for growth. I only resolved to vote with my feet when I determined that my principal opted to elevate politics over core principles that I considered non-negotiable. On exiting formal public service and returning to my professional commitment in academia, the advantage of hindsight compelled me to come to terms with the significance and opportunity for loyalty to bridge my exit and voice. As many pondered how I could boldly resign a highly coveted appointment with an equally choice portfolio, I reassured them that I missed teaching and research. In retrospect, the security of tenure was subliminal in the solace I took to resort to scholarly inquiry as a framework to cultivate a robust capacity to voice my discontent and agitate for meaningful change. This epiphany was transformative for me for two main reasons. First, it was humbling in bringing home to me the incongruity of my being compared with dislocated functionaries and career politicians who were still hanging around the corridors of power, soliciting successive appointments as a livelihood strategy. Second, it gave me great empathy for the challenges of public servants in my country, which in turn reoriented me to “light a candle than curse the dark.” I invoke this metaphor in this vein to underscore the degree to which loyalty vehemently asserted itself for our purposes.

The privilege of being one of a handful of persons selected from among a population of close to 200 million citizens and subjects to share governance responsibility at such a high level simultaneously exposed me to the problems of, and prospects for, reform. A burning desire for relief from being inundated with seemingly intractable problems amplifies exit as a problem-solving paradigm, if one's perception of the benefits of a respite outweighs the burdens that attend how invested they are in making a difference as a critical stakeholder. To my mind, the dilemma implicit in this scenario demonstrates Hirschman's conclusion that “loyalty holds exit at bay and activates voice”. As the Chief of Staff to the President often reminded me in the throes of my frustrations, “Nigeria belongs to all of us”. What I took from this admonition was that it would be confounding, if not simply irresponsible, to “shake the dust off my feet,” exit, and then turn around to lament the deficits I fingered and spurned to escape. Post-office, reflecting from the safe distance of academia, there was no escaping the reality that the “[bell] tolls for thee”. This consciousness provided a constructive twist or pivot to bring the force of my loyalty to bear on leveraging my exit to enrich my voice. It constituted the impetus for convening the Leadership Enterprise for Africa's Development that allowed me to collaborate with Obasanjo to reframe accountability and help foster conditions for Africa to learn its way out of compelling crises of state.

In a review of Adelman's biography of Hirschman, Seyla Benhabib found it an interesting oddity that Hirschman's “most important insight struck him while he was contemplating, of all things, the trains of Nigeria.” For this Nigerian, it is befitting to pay tribute to Hirschman by exploring the logical extensions of this insight for Western democracies, particularly at this historical moment. The lessons of my experience in office concretely sensitized me of the transformative potentials of virtue ethics as a contributor to democratic resilience and sociopolitical stability. Common pathways articulated to address the root causes of current political dysfunctions disproportionately focus on institutional reforms to the diminution of individual agency, which is definitive of the essence of democracy as government by the people for the people. My presentation will explore the implications of civic virtue as a crucial correlate to equip ordinary lives to evolve into loyal citizens and subjects with active stakes in ameliorating pertinent contingencies of culture and structure. Thus, I argue that the paramount challenge to harness corresponding opportunities in the acute stressors defining this political epoch in the US is to reorient candidates and electorates to embrace the compelling responsibility to “make Americans American again” as an indispensable pathway to “make America great again”.