Two wrongs don’t make praedial larceny right

Many readers will no doubt recall the video shot in early March, of a burly farmer holding a lasso around the waist of an emaciated, pitiful looking woman and walking along the side of a rural road in Massy Lands, Gasparillo in the midday sun. It just went viral and aroused the ire of almost everyone who viewed it. Abuse, misuse, slavery, violence, violation of human and Constitutional rights, male chauvanism and shame were some of the comments. While the Chamber shares the view of all right-thinking citizens, it also wishes to include in national focus some other concerns which also surfaced from the contents of this distressing recording, without devaluing attention to the abuse.

Repeated praedial larceny of Sunil Ramcharan’s pepper crops - allegedly by the tied woman, Zaheeda Mohammed and her husband Kimchan Jordan - is what drove him to the point of utter frustration. Mr. Jordan had previously been charged with stealing a crocus bag of peppers from the same land under cultivation by Mr. Ramcharan, for which the court had convicted and fined him $2,500.00 for the offence.

In 2011, the T&T Chamber drew attention to the similar frustration of avocado farmer Granville Jessop of Madoo Hill, El Dorado, whose avocadoes were also being carted off in the daytime by thieves with a van, and who contemplated poisoning them, until the Tunapuna police seized from him syringes and the pesticide Cypro. Mr. Jessop also complained that he had been subjected to violent attacks by crop thieves, displaying a disfigured ear and a scarred body.

Amendments to the Praedial Larceny Act, earlier this year increased its fines from $5,000 to not more than $30,000 and imprisonment for most offences. In the Chamber’s view, its provisions seen to be quite appropriate. It established a Praedial Larceny Squad which comprises specially trained police officers. In 2013, the T&T Chamber’s CONTACT magazine reported that a Praedial Larceny Unit, headquartered in the Eastern Division, had been operating (over time) with between 5-7 officers in each Division. In January this year, a newspaper report referred to Minister of Food Production Devant Maharaj’s statement that 76 SRPs
who had joined the Police Service would be trained for the Praedial Larceny Squad.

While it has enjoyed some success, we are certain that many more angry, frustrated and dissatisfied Sunil Ramcharans and Granville Jessops of the country continue to harbour dreams of retribution. A more aggressive posture towards enforcement of the law, along the same lines as the recent “total policing initiative,” must be top of the ‘to do’ list not just selectively though, but on a regular, consistent basis, for praedial larceny is a round the clock activity.

Thanks to advances in technology and social media, which propelled the Gasparillo police into action, Sunil Ramcharan was arrested and charged for assaulting Zaheeda Mohammed with the rope. Placed before Magistrate Natalie Deop in the San Fernando Magistrate’s Court, he pleaded not guilty and she granted him bail. This despite all the evidence being on social media.

Roger Hosein, one of our oft-quoted national economists, has pointed out recently in support of a policy to index wage increases to productivity, that the nation’s food import bill totals $6 billion. The T&T Chamber reiterates that more sustained national efforts must be directed at reducing this and preventing any increase. Praedial larceny, diversification of the economy into non-oil industries and making Trinidad and Tobago food independent continue to be elusive targets. Decreasing praedial larceny is integral to the success of that independence and the proficient management of crime, in these days of declining revenues.

Two wrongs may not make a right, but most of us know what right is, and need to do just that.