ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN POLITICAL MANTRAS capturing the pervasive vagaries of politics is that a week is a long time. Graphic reaffirmation comes to mind in the wake of the political tsunami that swept Trinidad and Tobago last Monday.

In the twin-island republic's elections, Prime Minister Patrick Manning and his People's National Movement (PNM) were ousted in a massive 29 to 12 victory for the People's Partnership coalition led by Mrs Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

The turnout at the polls was 70 per cent, and it was predictable at midday, hearing of long lines at polling stations, that the electorate was voting for change.

Why Manning chose to call an election 30 months into his term only he would know. If, as was widely speculated at the time, it was to pre-empt the no confidence motion due to be debated in parliament on the day when it was dissolved, it was one of the biggest miscalculations of a prime minister in regional politics.

It is indicative of his arrogance that he bragged that he was walking around with the date in his back pocket since October and never discussed it or sought the advice of any cabinet or party colleague. That resonated negatively with both party and country, even those trumpeting "ah PNM till ah dead".

As hubris set in Monday night, Manning did the proper thing by accepting full responsibility for the defeat. During the campaign, Dr Keith Rowley - who had been fired from cabinet for highlighting the shenanigans of the infamous UDECOTT and its CEO, the Canadian Caldar Hart - asked the electorate to distinguish between Manning and the PNM.

And after resigning as political leader on Thursday, the PNM chairman pushed Manning under the same bus. But the final arbiters, the electorate, had no time for such nuances. A well known behavioural trait of political leadership is the cultivation of sycophants, and ostracism of dissenting voices.

So Rowley, the stone cruelly rejected by the builder, the party has resurrected to turn around its wilted fortunes.

There are lessons in the Trinidad experience for all those offering themselves for political office. Seeing and listening to Manning, one got the impression that he saw himself as God's gift to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, not their chief servant. Being booed at Balisier House, PNM headquarters, on Monday night and again on Thursday must have been sobering.
In the unforgiving world of politics, the former prime minister, who moved around with an ever present retinue of outriders and security personnel, had to call for police protection as he tried to enter his car, and was surrounded by a hostile crowd of PNM supporters.

Hearing that the roof of President's House had collapsed and repairs costing $2 million neglected, and next door Manning lived luxuriously in the prime minister's mansion renovated at a cost of $300 million, I thought it indicative of his detachment from reality.

Rubbing salt in the wound, swearing in of the new government was done at the Foreign Ministry. Barbadians would never tolerate a similar situation.

His imposition of a non-national in a critical state organisation spending billions of taxpayers' dollars, and relentless defence of him when faced with a plethora of incriminating evidence, was an act for which the taxpayers themselves only wanted an opportunity to exact mass revenge in the best way available to them.

The new prime minister has said that her administration will not embark on a witch-hunt.

However, she consistently said during the campaign that there must be full accountability and those who did the crimes must do the time. Crime and concerns about personal security reached frightening heights during the Manning years and how the new administration tackles these areas will be carefully scrutinised.

The way Mrs Persad-Bissessar - the lady from Siparia, a predominately Indian area Manning said could not produce a prime minister - went about putting together a winning combination was a lesson in itself. Sensing that disenchantment with Manning and the PNM was fully turgid, she carefully constructed a new grouping with a broader base and new faces.

So a bridge was built across traditional tribal waters. In a political bifurcation where the UNC was overwhelmingly Indo-Trinidadian, Jack Warner an Afro-Trinidadian, was elected chairman and strong links forged with other prominent Afro-Trinidadians like Errol McCleod, David Abdullah and Makendal Daaga who brought not only fellow ethnics, but the support of their organisations.

This, along with the Afro-Tobagonians, gave an attractive new face to the People's Partnership. Forging an alliance with Winston Dookeran's Congress of the People, which secured almost 150 000 votes but no seats in the previous poll, was another key stroke, as was her securing leadership of the party from 77-year-old Basdeo Pandy.

And for the first time since 1975, there will be no Pandays in the House since both Basdeo's daughter Mikela and brother Subash were de-selected, as was one-time UNC powerhouse and attorney general Ramesh Maraj. That demonstrated a fundamental understanding of the times and commitment to root and branch treatment in the overarching party and national interests.
Something Barbados can take from the campaign was the use of the electronic media to broadcast political meetings live. With increasing numbers eschewing soaking up the night air listening to a lotta political long talk, it would help if meetings with clear protocols could be beamed into our living rooms.

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