



Jean Lowrie-Chin

# The rising Bruce Golding

**H**AD he poured his passion into other endeavours, Bruce Golding would by now have several "handles" on his name. But from childhood, Golding has been taking the road less travelled. Imagine this nine-year-old from Alpha Primary, refusing to accept that he was too young to attend high school. He marched himself over to St George's College, armed with his excellent Common Entrance results, to argue his case to the authorities.

Golding entered St George's at 10, and passed the Senior Cambridge exams before he was 15 with distinctions in Maths and English. At 19, Golding interrupted his studies at UWI to rescue his father's campaign when changes in his constituency boundaries deprived him of several strongholds. The late Speaker of the House, Tadius Golding, won a decisive victory.

Tomorrow, when the Leader of the Opposition Jamaica Labour Party celebrates his 59th birthday, he cannot only look back at super-sized accomplishments, but can also look forward to a general election next year, the best chance of his lifetime to lead his country.

So what are some of the credentials of this man, Bruce Golding, who does not immediately sweep you off your feet, but whose quiet warmth eventually "takes your spirit"? Charisma comes in many forms. At the 63rd JLP Conference on November 19, Golding said, "I am what I am. I am just a simple human being who loves his country, who has an abiding faith in the goodness of the Jamaican people."

Steeped in the politics of the Jamaica Labour Party since he was two years old, Golding entered active politics as a teenager and, by age 24, became Jamaica's youngest ever member of parliament, copping the West St Catherine seat, a national record that still stands. Golding told the conference what he believes for himself: "We are born with the capacity for greatness."

So used are we to different manifestations of greatness, the fiery Marcus Garvey, the swashbuckling Bustamante, that we find it difficult to think of greatness in the form of a man who would walk away from a powerful position in the JLP, beg his country's forgiveness for past sins, start a "new and different" political party and lose his cherished seat in Parliament because he refused to answer violence with violence.

But this is exactly what happened after his proposal for reforms in the JLP were rejected in 1995, the beginning of seven lean but redemptive years for Bruce Golding.

I winced for the NDM, when I heard their slogan, "Change the System", focused on constitutional reform. Perhaps because we are still graduating semi-literates out of high school I knew that this approach would get little traction. Campaigning in a "new and different" way, turning his back on any form of intimidation, Bruce Golding lost his seat in the House of Parliament.

Well do I remember that election day in 1997. As communications consultant for the EOJ, I received a call to prepare an urgent radio announcement. It appeared that poll clerks at certain stations in Central St Catherine had been threatened the night before and had not turned up to open the polls. After the notice reminding the presiding officers that they could be penalised under the law for delinquency, they showed up. No one will ever know how many votes those late starters cost Golding.

After a failed by-election in North East St Ann, Golding called it quits with the NDM, and admitted responsibility for not being able to attract more votes. We heard Golding being called many names: "failure",



Close-knit family: Golding, wife Lorna and children (l-r) Ann-Merita, Steven and Sherene.

"traitor", "politically dead".

That he could have hosted such a balanced, interesting talk show, "Disclosure", running second only to the entrenched "Hotline" is yet another instance of Bruce turning defeat into a "Golding Opportunity". In a back-handed way, these testing times served him well, proving to detractors that he was his own man, not a "Seaga clone".

Golding's stable family life is not typical of our political leaders. His wife of 34 years, Lorna, and his three children have publicly attested to his love and support. As we warmed to Errald Miller's endorsement of his beautiful Portia, so has the public responded positively to the lovely, serene Lorna Golding speaking of her husband's encouragement of her entrepreneurial ambitions.

This unconditional support system has taken Bruce Golding through his darkest days. When the JLP came a-courting in 2002, Golding insisted that a Memorandum of Understanding be drawn up before he accepted.

Among the terms insisted on by Bruce Golding were:

- practical initiatives to eliminate political tribalism and garrison politics.
- special prosecutor to investigate and prosecute corruption among public officials.
- oversight committees of Parliament to be chaired by Opposition members.
- re-examine issues of separation of powers, term limits and fixed election dates.

It is a secure human being that would prescribe his own limitations. "I have sought to build the party not around me but around a set of ideas and principles," Golding told the conference. "Leaders will come and leaders will go, but the ideals that hold us together will endure."

Within three short months from February to April of last year, Golding's political fortunes reached a new high as he was elected unopposed as JLP leader, won the election in West Kingston to become their Member of Parliament, thereby becoming eligible to take over as Leader of the Opposition.

Golding's legendary organisational skills, attracting credible new members, have sent the party's stocks soaring. Jamaicans have welcomed this more unified, re-energised Opposition party, their vigilance backed by meticulous research. Even as Bruce Golding hopes to form the next government, he continues to demand a strengthening of the Opposition's role. PNP Senator Trevor Munroe has made similar calls — a welcome departure from the divisive games of old-style politics.

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