

P.A. B/N -

Edward Seaga:

Seaga-Edward

On retirement, regrets and rivals

Following his recent announcement of a timetable for retirement from the leadership of the Jamaica Labour Party, Opposition Leader Edward Seaga spoke with Earl Moxam about that decision and some of the implications. Excerpts of the interview are published below.

EM: Mr. Seaga, you've just announced plans for your retirement. But are you really comfortable with this decision?

ES: Of course! I wouldn't have made the announcement if I wasn't comfortable with it.

EM: I raise that question because even some of your close allies are claiming that you were pushed into making that decision.

ES: No. That is not true. As I've explained, even to my own constituents, that decision was made from early in the year, when I looked at the future in terms of my own life interest and the party's own interest. I recognized that this year I will be 74. When the next general election is held I'll be 77. Assuming that it was won, I'd be going into eight years in public life, and that's a very serious position. And I never, at any time, planned my life around staying that long in public life, having regard to how early I started. Now, if you take this 2007 benchmark, and you recognize that there is the 2006 Local Government election, you have to also recognize that a new leader would have to be in office for the year 2005 to make ready for 2006. Now, to be in office in 2005 means the change has to come in 2004. So that's what led to the date of change. Now, as to the timing of the announcement, in my mind it should be at Central Executive, because that's the broadest and highest decision-making body, outside of the all-island General Conference. The first of the quarterly meetings was held on March 28. It's not a good time because it would be just before Budget and that would be very disruptive. The second was June 28 and this is where I had planned to do it, until it became obvious that we were not going to have a proper turnout for that session. And I had to postpone the session to July 18. So, on that basis, I decided to hold until July 18.

EM: Why was it not going to be a proper turnout on June 28?

NEW METHOD

ES: A new method of advising members was being tried out and it just didn't function well. Now I had mentioned to a group of MPs who had asked to see me, privately, four days before the Central Executive, what my intentions were. Because, with four days to go, I didn't think there was any harm. But it started to leak out, hence I had to forget about July 18 and bring it forward to the date that I made the announcement.

EM: Just to be clear: Upon retiring as Leader of the Party you're still in Parliament; you are still the Leader of the Opposition. Is this a position that you will relinquish immediately?

ES: No. You relinquish that when a new leader is elected, provided that this new leader sits in the House of Representatives. So I would await the outcome of a new leader being elected and the determination as to whether that new leader had a seat or not.

EM: Of course there's a scenario in which Bruce Golding who is now not in the Lower House becomes the new Leader and therefore, by virtue of that, he does not immediately become Leader of the Opposition. Does

that then leave you with any further consideration where that is concerned?

ES: No. It's expected that Mr. Golding is going to enter the House. I don't know what arrangements are being made, but I'm sure that there must be some discussions going on with one or more members, as to who would give up a seat for him, so that a by-election would be held. Whether that happens in time for November or March next year, I cannot say; but whenever the time is, I would have to make the transition.

EM: West Kingston... Do you anticipate continuing to represent that constituency into a new term?

ES: Most certainly, for the rest of this term, and quite likely for at least one other term, because there are some major projects going on, which I certainly wish to see completed.

EM: As far as the leadership race is concerned assuming that

you had planned to remain neutral in the race does it bother you that the contents of that letter to Mr. Golding (criticizing his leadership ability), may prejudice some delegates against him?

ES: Well, Mr. Golding has admitted that he showed the letter to a number of close colleagues, and from that step it somehow found its way to the parliamentarians in Parliament on Wednesday afternoon. So the leak came from that side, and frankly, I think that was a huge mistake. I didn't write him to, in any way, publicly expose my feelings. I wrote him to privately to urge him to consider the views I was putting to him, because I thought that these views, if he took them seriously, would assist him to be the better leader that he needs to be if his ambitions are achieved.

EM: That having been done, do you plan to make any further statement to clarify what

you think of him as an aspiring leader?

ES: No. I wrote the letter in all honesty and in good part because I couldn't get a meeting with him. I phoned him the Thursday night and I postponed the meeting. I had to leave a message on his phone because I didn't get him. I figured that he would contact me the Friday as I was going on before the conference in Montego Bay from the Friday for a couple of days of vacation. I deferred my departure from seven in the morning till something like 2:00 or 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, expecting that he would have called. Mrs. Prudence Kidd-Deans had spoken with him that morning and reminded him that I wanted to see him and that I didn't want to see him for five minutes but for a good session. Well, he didn't call and I figured that after I got back in, on Sunday, then on Monday he would call. He still didn't do so and so I was

left with no alternative but to write him on the matter. But what I wrote was a private matter between us, in which I was, in effect, giving him advice, however strongly I had put it, because my intention was to shock him into understanding. You must understand that throughout Bruce's career he has been a sort of protégé of mine. Even when he left to form his own party, I brought him back, and I'm not saying things now that I have not said before to him and, to a certain extent, said publicly. But the intention is not in any way to damage his campaign. Far from it! It was to assist him to be the better leader that would assist his campaign, and it was not my intention that what was said by me in that letter would ever have been exposed and therefore left him open to damage.

EM: At that very human level, to what extent have you been hurt by Mr. Golding's

actions in the past few days, and prior to that, when he left and formed the NDM?

ES: Well, I don't know what you mean by me being hurt by Mr. Golding, because I don't know that he's done anything other than to expose himself. He's certainly not hurt me. He hurt himself and that's unfortunate.

EM: You have had a long relationship with him; you say you've regarded him as a protégé and some have even described the relationship as father/son relationship, so there must be a human element to that.

ES: Yes, there is a human element, but I'm not getting the question that you are asking.

EM: Well, essentially, I just want to elicit from you whether, in terms of inter-personal relations, you felt hurt by the fact that someone who had been so close to you had initially left the party and, having come back, there are the recent developments.



ES: No. The fact that he left the party, that's so far back I don't even remember what feelings existed then. And he came back at my insistence. I didn't just bring him in; I brought him in eventually to a meeting with my four deputies and I said to them, this is my intention and they endorsed it. So it wasn't a decision that I made alone. Since returning our relationship hasn't changed, but the position that he now holds is a critical one and one in which he has to operate in a certain manner.

FUTURE LEADERSHIP

EM: Are you comfortable with the thought of the future of the JLP being in the hands of Bruce Golding, as far as his leadership qualities are concerned?

ES: I don't know that I can respond to that. There are shortcomings now that have to be dealt with. If they are dealt with then I would be comfortable; if they are not, then I wouldn't be.

EM: You are comfortable with the thought that there are other viable prospects for leadership of the party?

ES: Yes. I am comfortable that there are other people who could be accepted as leaders.

EM: Certainly, observing in Parliament over the past decade or so, your comment in the 90s about potential leaders in the party not being able to deal with complex matters has hurt your party. I've seen your side being heckled time and again over those words. How much would you say that your second tier leaders have grown over the last 10 years?

ES: I think my second tier leaders have matured, and I am satisfied that they were doing a good job; all of them worked hard; the fact that we were not successful in 2002 I don't ascribe to any of them. We fell down in four or five constituencies, partly out of the negligence of the candidates and in certain specific constituencies because of the rain factor which affected our side more than the PNP.

EM: Is there any major mistake perhaps a decision which you made, which, in hindsight, you have regretted?

ES: I think that in inter-personal relations, which is not really my strongest point, that I could have made some mistakes along that line in the 1990s, which, had they not occurred, may have resulted in an easier passage for the party. But going into details now would involve name calling which I don't want to do.

■ See conclusion in tomorrow's Gleaner.

B/N seaga - Edward PAB
Sunday Gleaner July 4, 2004