

A colourful record

IT IS not enough that the University of the West Indies (UWI) should accord former Opposition Leader Edward Phillip George Seaga the Distinguished Fellow status. It should give the region a full, definitive scholarly assessment of one of the finest champions of the Jamaican under-classes; a man tragically misunderstood and mischaracterised.

In giving us this study, the UWI should acknowledge that it has been almost unforgivably remiss in being so late with a study that should have easily recommended itself. The political left and the progressive forces of the 1970s should also freely confess that it grossly misrepresented Mr. Seaga and allowed the partisan struggles of the period to cloud a scientific analysis of this remarkable Jamaican.

Even Professor Carl Stone, my Jamaican model of the intellectual par excellence, failed to properly position Edward Seaga. In his now famous quote, contrasting Mr. Seaga's managerialist leadership style to the populist and visionary styles, he failed to capture the essence of Edward Seaga.

The man is not just a pragmatist who was highly efficient and competent. He was not just an institution-builder and an implementer, in contrast to Michael Manley. That he certainly was. But there was something more fundamentally driving his passion to implement things and to build institutions; something which made him impatient with sloppiness and incompetence and which pit him against many accustomed to a

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political and public sector culture of ease, indifference and sloth. It was the vision he had for the Jamaican people. Yes, Edward Seaga was a visionary political leader. And he was populist in the sense of being obsessed with and single-minded in his devotion of the Jamaican poor and marginalised.

He was never populist in the sense of using rhetoric to incite class warfare or making short-term decisions just because they would gain political mileage. He did not play to the gallery or sought cheap popularity. Indeed, he paid dearly for spurning that time-honoured Machiavellian tradition, refined to an art in Jamaican politics.

ADVOCATE OF THE POOR

Edward Seaga stands in the league of Michael Manley as an indefatigable, relentless advocate of the Jamaican dispossessed and voiceless. If anyone had told me as an ardent progressive in the 1970s that I would ever live to write that of Edward Seaga, I would think the person a stark, staring lunatic. But today, if I were to make any correction of that statement it would be to point out that it was Michael Manley who followed the radical tradition of Edward Seaga.

It was Edward Seaga who in

1961 gave that memorably strident and poignant 'haves and have-nots' speech in the Legislative Council; a speech that would set the tone of his entire political life. Whereas Alexander Bustamante did have a focus on the working class, and while there were radical political activists from the 1930s who championed the cause of poor and disenfranchised, Edward Seaga brought a comprehensiveness of vision and a depth of understanding of the strengths, ingenuity, creativity and centrality of the underclasses – urban and rural – that was unusual.

Something profound happened to Seaga; a life-transforming, cathartic experience which would never allow him to brush himself off and pretend it never happened. When in 1953 he began to immerse himself in the culture of the Jamaican working and peasant classes from the vantage point of Salt Lane, Back-o-Wall as well as from deep rural Jamaica, and saw not only the depth of poverty but the wealth of the people's culture, Edward Seaga had the psychological equivalent of a 'born-again' experience.

Seaga became, in the jargon of sociology, a 'participant observer' of working class and peasant life. As he himself would later write, "I had lived in these areas experiencing life not as a visitor but waking and going to bed in the households of the village and ghetto and experiencing the widest form of participation possible of everyday life."

Please see **RECORD, G4**

JANUARY 23, 2005 **SECTION G**

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RECORD

Continued from G1

There are some cynics who say that Seaga merely used his profound grasp of poor people's culture and religious forms as a means to his political end; that he manipulated them because he understood their psyche so well. This view is more reflective of prejudice and bias than serious analysis. Motives often defy empirical quantification. What we have to do, if we are to take a scientific approach, is to see whether we find verification of our hypothesis, or make what the philosophers call an inference to the Best Explanation when the data is not definitive or coercive.

There is an abundance of circumstantial evidence that Edward Seaga's interest in the poor and oppressed is not feigned or cynically exploited as a means to an end, but reflects a deep-seated, unquenchable commitment. This country has never understood just how profoundly Seaga has believed in the primacy of the working and peasant classes. Seaga is not an elitist who believes our solutions will come from the middle and upper classes. He believes deeply that it is the ordinary Jamaican who has put Jamaica on the map. The respect and honour that he has for the black poor as a 'white man', most black people don't have for themselves.

OUTSIDER TREATMENT

I was particularly touched in the last campaign when Seaga took so much of his time at that massive Half-Way Tree meeting to explain his 'scandal bag' reference and his deep respect for the Jamaican people. We have always made Seaga feel like an outsider. He has, for too many years of his life, had to justify his existence among us. And we have for too long made him feel like an interloper; like he didn't really belong. Even members of his own party have treated him like that. And yet there have been few in our political history who have as intensely and as passionately believed in the Jamaican people and their culture.

While many of us have despised and condemned the religious expressions with African roots-revivalism, Kummina-elevating European forms over them, Seaga has done much to give them respectability. Don't talk nonsense about his being insincere and only using that to gain political mileage. How can you, in a fundamentalist, Bible-thumping country like this where revivalism is condemned as satanic, seek to gain popularity by speaking well nationally of what is



JLP farewell to Edward Seaga, at Coronation Market in West Kingston.

termed 'Devil worship'?

Seaga's establishment of Jamaica Festival, Things Jamaican, Devon House, the Cultural Training Centre, The Jamaica Journal, National Heritage Week and his ideas for the redevelopment of Port Royal, Seville and Spanish Town as historical monuments all attest to his abiding belief in the richness and texture of Jamaican culture.

Don't forget, too, the 100 village programme of the 1960s. People have it backwards: It was not his quest for political power which made him such an unrivalled promoter of Jamaican culture. It was because he fell hopelessly in love with Jamaican culture and his Jamaican people why he sought political power to be able to elevate the Jamaican masses. We have never been allowed to see this portrait of Seaga for he has been so demonised – and has contributed so much to his own demonisation – that he has become someone we love to hate.

I spent all of the 1970s opposing him. Because he was so obnoxiously reactionary in that period and spent so much

time spewing venom at my political hero, Michael Manley, I had no time for him. I used to meet regularly with a group of rabid leftists and our favourite subject was that pro-imperialist Edward Seaga who was intent on selling out the country to the CIA. My father was a PNP activist who operated his tailoring establishment on Charles Street, Western Kingston. From a child I heard horror stories about this awful, terrible and violent monster named Edward Seaga.

INTELLECTUAL BREADTH

What made many of us progressives lose sight of the fact that Seaga has really been a defender of the poor and oppressed is that he never had the intellectual breadth of Michael Manley, and never understood as lucidly as Manley did, the international political and economic order, and the role that order played in the underdevelopment of the Third World. Seaga's weakness has been a certain level of insularity and this is what makes him so instinctively pro-American and

reactionary on foreign policy issues.

The brilliance of Michael Manley was his sophisticated grasp of the interconnectedness of oppression and its global ramifications. Seaga has never understood how the struggle for liberation of the poor is inextricably bound up with the global political economy. In 2005 Manley is even more relevant than he was in the 1970s, and he remains my chief Jamaican political hero. Modern Jamaica has produced no finer intellectual in the political class.

Because the Marxists so dominated political discourse in the 1970s and had such an affinity for an ideology developed outside of our historical context, they met the fierce opposition from the fiery nationalist Edward Seaga. The Marxists from the UWI, for ideological reasons, and the PNP, for partisan reasons, were busy demonising Seaga in the 1970s and beyond, failing to see that it was his rootedness in the culture of the Jamaican people which made communism and socialism so repugnant to him. Ironically, it was he as the despised 'no

born ya' political leader who was most defiant in resisting the alien ideology.

A DEFENDER OF CULTURE

The crusade to cast Seaga as an alien is the most despicable thing which has been done to him. It is time for the Left to publicly apologise to him. This man who brought back the remains of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, who was the main inspiration for Bob Marley, this man who promoted the artistic brilliance of Ma Lou and 'Kapo' Reynolds and who, as a lover of African art, rescued Kapo's works from confiscation when the police impounded them as evidence of the revivalist's involvement in obeah; this man who played such a critical role in the promotion of Jamaica's first internationally celebrated music form, the ska, and who pioneered the Jamaicanisation of the local insurance industry, should never have to defend his Jamaicanness. Few 'born yas' have been as Jamaican as Edward Phillip George Seaga.

To have been so deeply loved and to have been so resoundingly successful in a constituency where black nationalism, revivalism and Rastafarianism flourished is an eloquent testimony to the measure of this extraordinary Jamaican patriot.

BETRAYED

Seaga betrayed his class and colour to stand with the Jamaican masses. It was not only Michael Manley who did that, and the UWI must properly document that. In his very last speech to Parliament he ended as he started: By speaking out eloquently for the poor and marginalised. Seaga is always talking about 'the two Jamaicas' for he believes that we will never go forward until there is one Jamaica.

He was a political visionary, and a nationalist extraordinaire with an undying belief of the ingenuity of the ordinary Jamaican. That he had enormous failings and glaring weaknesses is well established. He made too many excuses for the criminal elements in Tivoli Gardens and took on too many of the 'tracing' and cussing characteristics of the urban underclasses. He had colossal leadership weaknesses as JLP party leader. He has left many scars on the Jamaican body politic. Yet, I still say, we must crown Edward Seaga 'Defender of the Jamaican Masses'. History will absolve him.

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