

B/N Seaga Edward

THE MOST HONOURABLE EDWARD PHILIP GEORGE SEAGA, ON,
FELLOW, INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA

The Institute of Jamaica accepts into its community of Fellows, the Most Honourable Edward Philip George Seaga, ON, a former Prime Minister of Jamaica, public servant extraordinaire, Distinguished Fellow of the University of the West Indies and an eminent and seminal contributor to arguably the most enduring, the most effective and the most positively impactful element in the growth and development of the Jamaican people in the post-colonial period of Jamaica's still burgeoning history.

The reference is to the field of cultural development and the related aspects that have gone to not only build the new Jamaican nation but to set it on a path of serious social transformation. The remit of the Institute of Jamaica neatly expressed as the 'encouragement of Arts, Science and Literature' was to receive fillip, greater meaning and deepened texture from the work and vision of Edward Seaga acting in his different capacities as Minister, Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition.

He had brought youthful and feisty exuberance to the challenge of engaging the creative potential of the people from below. For he felt that much of the efforts at cultural mobilization that had gone before had "fostered a Western-oriented contemporary school which flourished at least in productivity if not in originality of ideas and expression while the traditional school grown out of a predominantly rural folk...[which] for lack of encouragement and social status of its exponents, remained largely sterile."

That such sterility could be of little use to the new Jamaica that Independence envisaged, was clearly the message of his 1963 Five Year Development Plan. From the perspective and pen of Edward Seaga the Plan continued thus: "the artistic traditions of Africa especially were treated with ambivalence. It was an elusive heritage to the sophisticated performer or creator and there was no dynamic to propel and inspire creativity. As a result it dwindled in performance so that a whole new generation of the folk people themselves became largely unfamiliar with the songs, ring games, digging sports and religious rituals of their fathers."

Whatever might have been the arguments for and against such a predictably controversial position taken by the fiery young personage in the corridors of political power, the passionate advocacy of making the people from below a genuine source of energy for creative action in building the new Jamaica could later boast enduring impact. This in turn had the benefit of the intellectual support rooted in painstaking field research and scholarly documentation by the Harvard-trained sociologist.

As a practising politician and cultural activist he brought new dimensions to public office which benefited from the dynamic of intellect and imagination. And this is what is being acknowledged in the conferment of a Fellowship of the Institute of Jamaica on the Most Honourable Edward Seaga. He joins the likes of C.L.R James, Philip Sherlock, Edna Manley and Louise Bennett, George Lamming, Roy Augier, Gerald Lalor and Rex Nettleford as iconic members of the distinguished band of men and women who have brought to national development strategy the centrality of the products of a people's creative imagination, whether they be workers, peasants, inner-city dwellers or urban uptown folks.

The implication for national development was, indeed, evident to Edward Seaga who understood how the inherited sense of inferiority rooted in a history of denigration would only continue to deprive the country's vast majority of the energy and will needed for production and patriotic commitment, or for a sense of place and purpose in a country all were expected to call "home".

Small wonder, then, that plans, policies and programmes of action should have emerged to produce such creative artists of excellence as Mallica Reynolds better known as Kapo. Invaluable pieces of that artist's work held in a private collection and all but ready for export to foreign lands, were saved by Prime Minister Seaga for the Jamaican people as part of the nation's patrimony and have since been housed in the National Gallery, a Division of the Institute of Jamaica.

The emerging music recording industry engaging the talents of the people from below had already received similar passionate caring and attention from Edward Seaga. The result was not only a thriving music recording industry but an upsurge of creative talents bearing such names as Desmond Dekker and Prince Buster from the days of the ska, and later Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and the many others who have given to Jamaican popular music a brand-name of global proportions and arguably a lasting presence in the history of 20th and 21st century world music. Byron Lee and the Dragonaires were themselves mentored into regional fame - thanks to the Seaga vision and encouragement.

The National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica, internationally acclaimed and credited with being a key player in developing a distinctive Jamaican/Caribbean dance-theatre vocabulary and style was also a beneficiary of Edward Seaga's interest and patronage. So too, not long after, was the Jamaican Folk Singers, themselves underpinned by extensive field research into the traditional music of Jamaica in the wake of similar work earlier carried out by Edward Seaga himself on Jamaican cult music. According to a colleague-Institute Fellow, his vision for the Folk Music Research Unit, incorporated into the School of Music and later

into the African-Caribbean Institute of Jamaica (itself a Division of the Institute of Jamaica), "remains memorable for its clarity and the far-sightedness of the objectives he stated [at its launching] in addition to his own grasp of the process of developing a "classic" artistic expression drawing on the creativity of the Jamaican folk as a source of energy".

None of this would have borne fruit had he not ensured for such development viable institutional frameworks to cradle the ideas and transform them into action. For he understood that though his people can be long on ideas they are too often short on implementation. The tools to facilitate such implementation he sought to provide by introducing new frameworks while utilizing what were already in place. The Institute of Jamaica itself was one such framework given new energy by the young Minister, who, among other things, spearheaded the establishment of the publication the Jamaica Journal as a vehicle for the literary efforts of the country's historians, poets, scientists, writers and artists. And so was the new Festival Commission which later morphed into the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) building on the Seaga vision of the mobilization, celebration and acknowledgement of the creative talents of the people from below and especially of the youth through annual competitions.

What is now the Jamaica Heritage Trust was also the outcome of his institution-building urges and among the different cultural institutions, as with the Institute of Jamaica and Things Jamaican, (yet another institution intended for cultural growth and development) the long established practice of voluntarism found ardent expression among the thousands who served and remains a value critical to Jamaica's transformation. Such a contribution betrayed the deep understanding Edward Seaga had of the people he had come to help pilot across colonialism into Independence.

National Observances such as Heritage Week were introduced on his initiative with Heritage Week designed for intellectual discourse on both the tangible and intangible heritage of the Jamaican people. And his grasp of the international dimensions of Jamaican cultural activities found expression in his introduction of a National Commission of Unesco as well as in his encouragement of dialogue with that world body as far back as 1970 not only on matters that fall within the competence of UNESCO but also on the establishment of a Culture Fund that could help bring financial stability and guarantee continuity of effort in cultural development in developing country member-states. The perspective was not lost on those who shared the vision of the centrality of culture in the Jamaican development strategy.

Creative artistic activity, after all, fitted the Jamaican psyche well. It made sense that Edward Seaga should publicly state that "what is at the heart of the matter is the dictate of the Jamaican psyche against conformist restrictions and [pro] freedom of choice to acquire the best that is affordable....The Jamaican psyche", he concluded "will continue to assert itself as a free-wheeling driving force. It will not succumb to a state of lifeless insensitivity or...[of] non-expectancy..." For Jamaicans, as he continues passionately to believe, are unique in the way they make their way to overcome "inhospitable and unlikely odds."

It is such faith in those he was elected to lead that had him invest in facilitating the fulfillment of the creative aspirations of his people and especially in the creative potential of the young. This could well go down in Jamaican history as the "Tivoli cultural experiment", in the moulding of character by way of the exercise of the individual and collective creative imagination through education and training targeting such forms of action as sports and the arts.

If it takes cash to care, it also takes caring to achieve even in the face of penury. And if the inevitability of change threatens despair, Edward Seaga had no doubt that it is possible to achieve change without chaos.

Such, indeed, are the special gifts and the no less special contribution of time, energy, foresight and sustained dedication to the shaping of a modern Jamaica through the exercise of intellect and the application of effort in order to achieve. And on the basis of this, the Council of the Institute of Jamaica proudly confers on the Most Honourable Edward Philip George Seaga the high honour and distinguished title of FELLOW of the Institute of Jamaica.

Written by Professor the Hon. Rex Nettleford, OM, FII,

And read by Mrs. Jean Smith, Member of Council, IOJ

National Library of Jamaica