

THE NATION

B/N- Seaga, Edward.

# Seaga marks 37th year as MP

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**L**EADER of the Opposition, Edward Seaga, on Saturday celebrated his 37th year as the Member of Parliament for the constituency of West Kingston, the longest for any Jamaican.

This milestone comes ahead of his 40th anniversary as a Parliamentarian, to be celebrated on August 12, having been nominated to the then Legislative Council, now Senate, in 1959.

His has been a remarkable record of involvement and achievement and in an interview at his Paddington Terrace, St Andrew home on Friday he looked back at his long tenure in West Kingston.

Seaga's foray into the western end of the city of Kingston began several years before he became actively involved in politics. As a student of Sociology and Social Anthropology in the 1950s, he had spent several years in the area studying revival cults. He recalled that when he was approached by then JLP leader, Sir Alexander Bustamante, to become involved in politics, he told the party leader that West Kingston was where he would like to serve. This was also where Sir Alexander wanted him to serve, "much against the wishes of the hierarchy of the Labour Party, not knowing enough about my prior work in research and so on."

The party feared for his safety, in what was then, as now in many ways, was not always a safe part of the city to be in.

"But I was always very comfortable in West Kingston, because I had come to be involved, from a research point of view with the area for a number of years prior to becoming involved in politics," he remarked.

In addition, he noted that his family had also had a long association with the area, having conducted business there "from way back in the early part of the century."

Young Edward Seaga's first taste of political representation was in the referendum of 1961 when he was placed in charge of the constituency and then he was asked to stay on in the general elections which immediately preceded Jamaica's attainment of independence

in 1962. He has been there ever since, having successfully contested every subsequent general election.

He recalled that his primary concern was that of providing proper housing.

"The housing stock dated way back into the previous century and some of it had become quite dilapidated. In other areas although the housing was aged, nonetheless they were neat little homes and what I was so happy about was the fact that they (had) formed themselves into communities. Denham Town was a distinct community, Hannah Town was a distinct community. In those days Tivoli Gardens didn't exist. What was there was Back O' Wall, which was really a crime den. It had no housing at all, it was all lean-to shacks. It didn't even have sanitary conveniences or pipes - any pipes for water. (It had) a couple of stand-pipes and sanitary conveniences that had been put in just before independence by the PNP government at the time but that obviously couldn't suffice in any way. So we had some distinct communities and we had one area which was the greatest slum in the country," he remembered.

"This is where all the political movements started. The Garvey Movement, the labour movement and eventually the formation of the different parties came out of that area. It was also an area of great creativity and outstanding characters. But there were a number of outstanding characters that were known in the area. And you could always see them around. Duck and Dill Dill was a mother with a number of children, and some others ... Ranny Williams wrote a lot of his poems about them. It's an area that, because of the type of homes and so on people lived more on the street than in the home. And so you look up any lane and you see a crowd of people. It used to have more bars per square mile than anywhere else."

Seaga also recalled the plethora of revival churches that existed in the area then and recalled that it was out of the ferment and creativity that existed in Western Kingston that the country's indigenous modern musical forms, ska, rock steady and reggae had sprung. He also noted how pleased he was that he had been there when all this was unfolding and evolving.

He said the construction of Tivoli Gardens has been his most

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*Edward Seaga and his wife Carla, at their St Andrew home with their dogs.*  
(Photo: Michael Gordon)

important legacy as Member of Parliament.

"Well most certainly the elimination of this Back O' Wall slum area and the replacement with a community, Tivoli Gardens, that is now to be considered a small middle-income community. It is a very settled community, one in which people do have house pride and garden pride and so on; is, I think, the most outstanding achievement, because it involved a whole community of people."

Edward Seaga's involvement in the development of West Kingston has long gone past the stage of that of a regular Member of Parliament working in a constituency. It has become a labour of love, one that will extend long past his retirement from active representational politics, whenever that time comes.

"I don't put any time limits on West Kingston: because West Kingston is more than just politics to me. West Kingston is a social development programme and my life is social development and if I didn't have social development as a part of my life I would feel very empty. So West Kingston to me is an ongoing community programme. And it's like an extended family, it's not really a political base. Now we still have a lot of things to do there and we're hopeful that we can get through a lot more. You know, West Kingston was once regarded as an area where anything which had no further use in life would end up there. You had (the) May Pen cemetery, you had the abattoir, you had the worst garbage dump in Dungle, you had the crime den of Back O' Wall and so on ... The intention is to reverse that and I think we can say we are reversing it because there isn't a lot of movement out of West Kingston, certainly unless there is some outbreak of violence, because people are settled in there."

Seaga attributes this settled feeling on the part of residents, to, among other things, the fact that the area is provided for educationally, with its several schools at all levels, including three high schools. There was also, he said, the work of the West Kingston Trust through which many social services are provided for the area. He intends to continue his work in West Kingston "as long as there is a need, for as long as I can perform and for as long as the people will have me".

"I have to separate out representation as a political base for other political activity and representation which is purely intended to improve the life of the community and the people who I represent. And that is an ongoing thing that will continue until some stage where I feel that there is another way of doing what I'm doing or (there is) someone else (who can do it)."