

# Shearer — it took him 26 years...

By... A POLITICAL REPORTER

FROM RAGS TO riches is generally an over-statement in our Jamaican environment. From obscurity to stardom is a more precise description of our success stories, especially if the stellar ambition is political power and responsibility rather than wealth and influence.

Sir Alexander Bustamante achieved it—and it took him 24 years. Our new Prime Minister, Mr. Hugh Shearer, who was Sir Alexander's apprentice, covered the journey up the ladder to stardom—and it took him 26 years.

Mr. Shearer passed his childhood in the little obscure village of Martha Brae that takes its name from one of the larger rivers in the parish of Trelawny. He had just entered his teens when he earned his first distinction: he won the parish scholarship that took him from the Falmouth elementary school to St. Simon's College, one of the few privately owned high schools that were beginning to flourish in the city in those painful years before the second World War.

The youthful Shearer finished St. Simon's when he was 17. That was in 1940 a year of intense labour turmoil; for the infant labour movement, just two years old, faced a crisis of survival. Its unquestioned leader, Alexander Bustamante, had just been whisked off to internment at Up Park Camp for preparing a waterfront strike that would have increased the shortage of consumer essentials in an island that was already hard-pressed by war shortages.

The labour movement could have gone under with that body-blow, joining such former might-have-been popular movements like Marcus Garvey's people's movement that lay on the ash-heap of history. But the crisis of survival of the labour movement was staved off because Jamaica's burgeoning maturity had produced a parallel national political movement that could step in to fill the vacuum created by Bustamante's detention.

When young Shearer left St. Simon's, the PNP of Norman Manley and Crab Nethersole was helping to revitalize the stricken Bustamante Industrial Trade Union. The tall, lanky youth with the loose lips and the shrewd, cautious eyes, cast around for a waggon on which to gain a hitch. He was attracted to the BITU for reasons of kinship. He could claim a distant but unspecified blood relationship with Bustamante, fuming impatiently in detention. That gave him also a similar kinship with Busta's cousin, Manley, who was fighting to save the union. In the background was his modest ambition to become a journalist.

THE GANGLING YOUTH, whose outstanding feature was a pair of hands that reached unusually close to his knees as he walked, made contact with his kinsman's confidential secretary, Miss Gladys Longbridge, who held the key position in the union. Could she find him a job in the union? The matter was quietly arranged. He was assigned to help gather the news for the union's official weekly newspaper, the Jamaica Worker. For this work he was placed on the union's payroll at the starting wage of 12/- a week.

Young Shearer picked up the techniques of his new trade rapidly. He learned to write clean, straight copy that recorded the successes of the union. He learned to write eye-catching headlines that stimulated the spirits of the wage-earners in the fields. He learned the tricky business of getting the bundles of papers to the post office on a Thursday night so that they could reach the rural pay tables on a Friday afternoon, carrying the weekly inspiring message of a new world to be won by means of struggle and sacrifice.

Bustamante was released from detention in March 1942. The collaboration between the BITU and the PNP was abruptly ended. The "Chief" took once more to the organizing paths of the rural hinterland. The still youthful Shearer was saddled with the full responsibility of editing the union's newspaper. But journalism can be made to fit snugly into trade union politics. The young newspaperman found himself addressing workers' meetings, helping to organize strike picket lines, being drawn into strategy discussions of negotiations and strikes, then going on to write the news reports for publication in the four-page paper.

The PNP's strident pressure for independence, aided by the elected legislators under the leadership of the late JAG Smith, and some groups of citizens' associations, came to a head in 1944 with the promise of a new Constitution for Jamaica based on universal adult suffrage. The PNP was then the only political party in the field. A group of merchants, under the guidance of the city's most enterprising merchant-

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diser. Mr. Abe Issa, were setting about the formation of the Jamaica Democratic Party to offset the PNP's hard-lined socialism.

Bustamante stitched together the Jamaica Labour Party out of the branches of the BITU, prepared to contest the general elections fixed for December of that year. Shearer, who had just turned 21, was among the loyal lieutenants grouped around the "Chief" on the ground-floor of the party. Busta selected the constituency of West Kingston for himself, had Shearer along as one of his chief election assistants.

The JLP swept the polls by 22 seats to the PNP's 5, with 5 Independents. Busta's own personal success in West Kingston gave Shearer a political toehold in the constituency which he turned to good advantage three years later. In the 1947 municipal general elections, the JLP put him up for one of the divisions in the constituency. He came home an easy winner. For the next four years he added municipal responsibilities to his basic chores in the union and the party, particularly as chairman of the Public Health Committee of the KSAC.

Meantime, the now experienced Mr. Shearer was gaining in stature in the trade union movement. He sat right beside Busta at all important negotiating bouts, representing the workers. He appeared at union rallies as the most important speaker after Busta. He displayed even then the negotiating skill and platform eloquence that spurred him eventually into the top bracket of Jamaica's politicians.

The PNP had been badly defeated in the 1944 general elections. The defeat was severest in the Corporate Area. But with the tragedy-ridden mental hospital strike in 1946, resulting in Busta's being tried and acquitted for manslaughter, the PNP's fortunes began to turn in the city. The swing to the PNP was further reflected in the 1947 municipal elections, and given a greater impetus by the 1948 bus strike in which bombs — home-made — were tossed into buses driven by strike-breakers.

WITH THE SECOND GENERAL ELECTIONS coming up in 1949, Busta decided that his West Kingston constituency was not safe enough to be held against his 1944 rival, the PNP's Mr. Ken Hill. So Busta chose a safer berth in Southern Clarendon, deep in the heart of the sugar belt that was a firm union strong-

hold. Into West Kingston to carry the JLP's banner went Mr. Shearer. But although the JLP were returned for a second term of office, Mr. Hill proved too tough a nut for Mr. Shearer to crack. With defeat, Mr. Shearer resumed his major concentration on his trade union work.

Mr. Shearer was always conscious of the deficiencies in his early education. When he was working on the union newspaper, he made up for some of them by painstaking study and application. Later, in the trade union field, he sought for further correctives. In 1948 he accepted inclusion in the Colonial Development and Welfare Trade Union Scholarship Course that was held in Barbados. There, against a backgrounding of economics and history, promising trade union leaders were guided to the finer points of organizing, bargaining and conciliation.

One of the more enduring influences in Mr. Shearer's life came in 1951. He was selected as one of Jamaica's Labour representatives to the Moral Re-armament conference in Caux, Switzerland. He had travelled twice before: to Havana with the "Chief" in the middle forties — a jaunt that left little impression on him — and again to Barbados. But the MRA conference gave him the opportunity to go out into the great wide world that most Jamaicans think matters to them: to go through New York, London, Paris, Geneva.

Here, in these great cities, Mr. Shearer, still impressionable at 28, saw buildings and sites and people at work such as he had only read about as eighth and ninth wonders in his callow youth and heard about second-hand from the contacts of his early trade union days. At the conference itself, he was drawn actively into discussions of moral values and political principles that he had hardly thought about at home. Certainly in his native political and labour circles, there was scant opportunity for such discussions.

I think Mr. Shearer came to real maturity in that year 1951. After his return there was an increasing sophistication about him that marked him out for the top. It was more than mere coincidence that it was about this time that the shrewdly observant Bustamante publicly tipped him as his "heir-apparent" — a title that may have been meant to apply at the time only to the BITU.

IN THE 1955 GENERAL ELECTIONS Mr. Shearer made a second try for a seat in Parliament. He had recently been named Island Supervisor of the union. The circumstances were just right for him. The PNP had carried through its ideological purge in 1952 that swept its seat-holder, Mr. Ken Hill, out of the party. But the PNP's official candidate in 1955, Mrs.

Iris King, found that Mr. Hill still had deep roots in the constituency which he was bent on keeping. In the divisions between Mrs. King and Mr. Hill, Mr. Shearer was able to cut a clear path to victory. But the JLP was drowned in the PNP's national floodtide and Mr. Shearer had to be content to sit on the Parliamentary benches.

During the next seven years, Mr. Shearer's stature as a trade union leader in his own right came to its fullest flowering. He had to share the spotlight with the NWU's Micaael Manley — but as rivals; and the nature of their rivalry enhanced his prestige as much in his own party circles as in the country at large. The loss of his parliamentary seat in the 1959 general elections hardly touched that prestige; for in the JLP-BITU family, the political leadership clearly belonged to Bustamante, while the trade union accolade was just as clearly Mr. Shearer's.

When we came to the Referendum in September 1961 to decide Jamaica's relationship with the West Indies Federation, Mr. Shearer turned his massed labour battalions in the sugar belts in support of secession. Secession it was. In the pre-Independence general elections that followed as a consequence, Mr. Shearer repeated more of the same stimulating process for the JLP. And the JLP it was — to lead the new nation into Independence. So Mr. Shearer went into the fading Legislative Council for a short while, next in line to Sir Neville Ashbourne, the Leader of the LegCo; and with formal independence in August 1962, with Sir Neville going on to Washington as our Ambassador to the United States, Mr. Shearer took over the leadership of the Senate and the second most important Minister — to Bustamante — in the Cabinet.

The rest of the story is too recent to need detailing. As he crouched in the wings of his party, Mr. Shearer performed periodically at the United Nations. But he held his patience as far as personal office in his party was concerned. Although Busta wanted him to take over instead of Mr. Sangster, he was stubborn in his unwillingness.

Then Busta retired from the public stage. Mr. Sangster took over as his own man. But Death played out one of its bitter ironies on Mr. Sangster, leaving him with a death-bed award of knighthood as compensation. So Mr. Shearer's moment had come. He beat back his competition in the party caucus, Mr. Tavares and Mr. Lightbourne. But it took two ballots to reach victory. On the second, Mr. Shearer edged out Mr. Tavares by 16 votes to 15. But it was enough to make him the nation's third Prime Minister.