

B/N - Simpson, Portia

by Wyvolyn Gager



Portia joins in welcoming international football star John Barnes (2nd right) to Jamaica at a luncheon in his honour, with Mr. Owen Moss-Solomon, Managing Director of Hardware & Lumber, and Miss Carol Thompson, Marketing and Sales Manager. Hardware & Lumber were sponsors of a one-week football clinic for which John was in Jamaica in July.

Portia Simpson was out front in a recent opinion poll as the Minister of Government who has been most impressive since taking office in February.

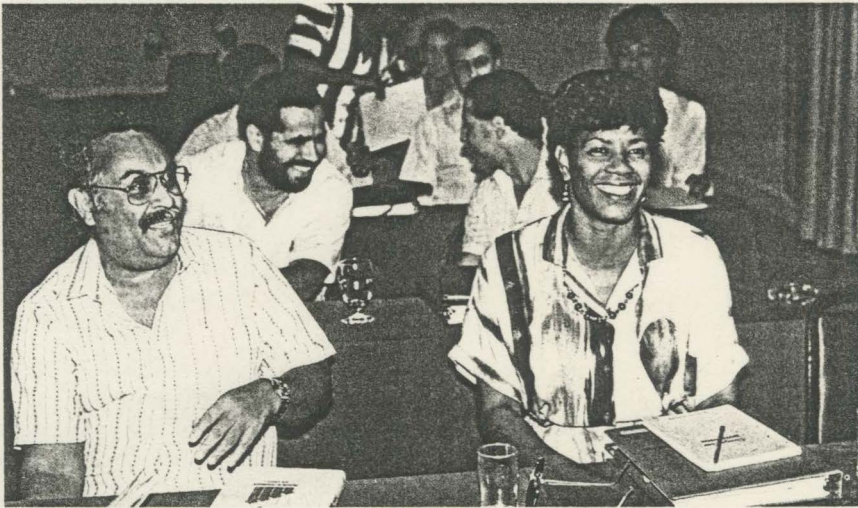
She was not surprised. "The Jamaican people have been watching me for years.

From a little girl it is as if the Jamaican people have been watching their own; grooming their own; so I must be a little different from some other politicians in this country."

The passion for Portia appears strongest among the poor, her constituency in South West St. Andrew being one filled largely with people living on the edge.

She is fired up when she talks about poverty. Little lights are dancing in her eyes. "We must find a way to fight poverty, it breeds violence, hatred and illicit drugs.

"I have walked it. I have lived it. I



have watched it and I hate it. I resent it."

As Minister with portfolio for Welfare, Portia is distressed at the number of Jamaicans on the food stamp programme. Sometimes entire families.

"There are about 300,000 people on food stamps, after we trim the programme. Why are we exposing, particularly so many of our young people, to hand-outs, to welfare? I don't think psychologically it is right."

One of her priorities is to devise some kind of programme which will move people into the productive stream and away from welfare.

"I have already instructed Ministry officials to look at ways in which we can channel some of the able-bodied people into something more meaningful.

"I know it is a vexed political question for some feel you are depriving poor people. Depriving them of what? What can \$20 or \$30 or \$40 do for anyone who is poor?"

Portia is talking dignity. She feels that if a young man does something productive either by himself or through a job, he will

have that feeling of pride which no public assistance programme could give.

Her upbringing in rural St. Catherine helped to prepare Portia for the rough and tumble world of politics.

As a youngster her father's barbecue (concrete platform) in Woodhall was the scene of many political meetings. Portia, who was attending the Marlie Hill Primary School at the time, was like all good children "seen but not heard". Her

elections, the constituency could not find candidates for the various divisions.

Faced with the dilemma of no representation, they realized they would be giving the JLP everything on a platter.

Portia was asked to run in the Trench Town area - "Just so that the seat did not go uncontested but certainly not to win."

Slight of figure with beautiful long hair, Portia Simpson was on the campaign trail going house-to-house, whipping up support as she went along.

"I remember I would go and knock at

Surrounded by classmates at a JIM management training course as she prepares herself for the future.

a house and say 'I am the PNP candidate', and some people would burst into tears, which was strange to the others following me. People were saying things such as 'my God she could be my daughter or granddaughter' or 'Can this little head bear that Crown?'

"You know Jamaicans are superstitious and every day I walk no matter how hot, it would drizzle a little and they would say 'even God bless her'.

"I also remember one Sunday I was passing a church and they asked me to meet the members so I went inside and they had just dismissed but they called back. Everybody was saying 'hallelujah' and someone looked at me and said 'Go forward to victory girl'. We left the church and I again started to walk. It was as if I had a microphone. People were just streaming out and running out and I felt, 'well I am going to get some votes'. On the night of the elections I won the division by over 1,200."

The new Councillor found that suddenly many doors were opening up for her. She was offered a scholarship by her employer, Hopeton Caven of the Trades Union Congress to study in London. At

task was to take the minutes for the adults who were talking their heads off about how they would like to see their country run.

"When I came to Kingston to go to secondary school, I remember there was a campaign for a by-election in 1969 for Mr. Hopeton Caven and they invited me as a student to attend the meeting and then by 1972 I got invited to attend a meeting in the constituency."

Gradually Portia was taking on more and more responsibilities. She was a secretary here, a chairman there, sometimes playing a pivotal role in as many as six groups.

As she recalled, young people shied away from political involvement. South West St. Andrew was no different. An energetic, young girl with so much enthusiasm was not going to get away from their grasp.

"They were so glad that they had one young person who could assist in motivating others and they kind of grabbed me."

By 1974, it was time for municipal

the same time, the principal of her alma mater, St. Martin's High School, called her back to offer her a scholarship to Mico College to attend evening classes.

Portia elected to serve the people. A maverick decision considering that her father wanted her to be a lawyer, above a politician. But while she served she worked on her personal development, doing a number of short courses in public relations, computer education and secretarial disciplines.

By 1976 Portia was being touted as the one to run for general elections.

"I think what attracted people to me most in the constituency was that while I was so quiet, so soft, so feminine, I was fearless, irrespective of how the guns were barking it was as if I didn't know danger. In fact I would be moving in the direction of the gunshots to see exactly what was happening. I didn't have a car and if they called me up at 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, I would grab a cab and I would go down into the constituency and stay there until next morning."

Resounding election victories in 1976 and 1980 thrust her into the big league. Portia Simpson was one to watch. In 1978 the PNP made her a Vice President.

Being labelled the next Iris King or the next Rose Leon or the next Nanny is no compliment to Portia. "I am Portia. I don't want to be Nanny, I don't want to be Iris King. What I want to be is Portia Simpson of Jamaica. I want my own identity. I set my own standards and my own goals that I can work towards".

She is acutely aware that many eyes are on her. While some admire her, others are jealous and exceedingly harsh in their criticisms.

"They are watching the one woman (in Cabinet) because they are praying, some people are praying for the one woman to fail. Although I know that the majority are rooting for me I am also aware of the

few detractors who really wish for me to fail and I say to myself Portia, girl, you have to get the necessary energy and strength.

"...My main objective is to perform so well and I am not saying I am going to succeed in everything, but I am gonna try



and when I am through, at the end of my term all my detractors are going to look, and I hope they will have the honesty to come right out and say 'My God she did well'."

Some of the criticisms concern her style of dress, and this really gets her riled up. "I regard it as rubbish, every time you turn up for Parliament....I am going to wear crocus bag one day, everyday it is like you are at a fashion parade. I don't go to Parliament for fashion I go there because I have contribution to make. I don't go there to be judged by the dress I wear. My priority is how I am thinking, where my head is at."

In preparation for her tasks as Minister of Labour, Welfare and Sports, Portia has been taking a hard look at her predecessors, assessing their performance and making decisions which she hopes will steer her from the pitfalls in which

they might have plunged while in office.

Budgetary constraint is something politicians of the 80's have become accustomed to. Portia ponders the allocation given her Super Ministry and weighs it against the many demands.

But if she had all the money she needed what would be her priorities? Some kind of productive programme within Welfare; assisting all hurricane victims in getting their lives back together; pensioners would get help in exchanging the plastics on their roofless

*Portia considers herself
"a little different".*

dwelling for proper roofing material; consumers would be protected; the handicapped and disabled would be given a new lease on life; the Ministry of Labour's employment centre would be given pride of place etc. etc.

The Minister is brim full of praises for staff. She says they are taking an active interest in what she does. They want to attend functions and stand beside her. She recalls a recent experience in the Bahamas when she made a speech at a Council of Ministers' meeting. She saw her Permanent Secretaries beaming with pride as she made her delivery. And at the end they wanted to show her that they were pleased.

It doesn't matter that many of the workers were there before and have worked with other Ministers. Portia Simpson is comfortable as long as there is professionalism and no attempt to bring politics into the work.

Success has not diminished Portia's communion with the people in her constituency who nurtured her during the fledgling times. "I try to go there once per week or sometimes at nights I would drive to a corner."

But what can she tell these people? What message of hope can she bring them? "It is quite difficult for me now, not because of the responsibilities but because of the expectations.

"It's a constituency that has really suffered, and they are so loyal to the PNP that they feel now the party is in power they should be reaping the rewards.

"I have explained to them that this year will be very difficult for the government to fulfill their expectations....they know that I will try my best, that anything that I can do to assist in any area I will do it."

Sister P, as many of them call her, is looking to the private sector to give some type of assistance.

"The constituency has a very large and important industrial area. I am going to be appealing to the private sector. I have already spoken to a businessman in the area and I have asked him whether a trust could be set up whereby the business community assists us with projects and things to the benefit of the constituency."

Portia Simpson could fill tomes with stories of suffering. She recalls one occasion when she was sitting in the constituency office in Whitfield Town when a woman came to her looking for a job.

"I told her I was not in power and it was difficult but I would try. I watched the tears roll down her cheeks. 'She said 'yesterday was Sunday and I watched my children go hungry..... this morning they went down the train line to pull some callaloo to boil in salt for the baby. I can't bear it no more and I have no one else in the world to turn to'."

Children who passed the Common Entrance whose parents could not find money to send them to school have

benefitted from Portia's kindness. Many of these children remember and they never let her forget those acts of kindness.

Unmarried and without children Portia has drawn closer to members of her family. Her sister and nieces live with her and she plays out that motherly role daily. She is also very close to her brother who is always available to help her financially and otherwise.

Does she regret not being married? "Why I haven't thought about it seriously. When you are in leadership you tend to have a serious problem, the whole question of jealousy, a man not understanding your responsibilities. It is difficult for them because they can't see themselves walking behind a woman."

The thrust of popularity is heady. What does Portia Lucretia Simpson see in the beyond? Will she be Jamaica's first female Prime Minister?

It's a subject she prefers to avoid, for



one, she is quick to point out her unequivocal support for Prime Minister Michael Manley. Secondly, she feels if there is talk of such aspirations people will immediately perceive that she is scheming her way to the top.

"I have never been able to decide my political future. Decisions are always taken for me by people and I am sure later on down the road if it is necessary and the Jamaican people see the need for a female Prime Minister then I feel they should make that decision.

"Once you begin to touch that subject you are gonna have some people feeling that everything I do, I am fighting against that one and I really don't intend to fight against anyone in the PNP.....but I am demanding my right to take up my rightful position so that I can make my contribution to the development of my country. And isn't it my right?"

A very private person by nature, Portia is an avid reader as a way to relax and also to keep informed. Happy that sports is one of her areas of responsibility, Portia says she relaxes at many of these events, except boxing. "I don't like to see anybody get punished, some of them are from my constituency and when they get a hard punch it's like I am taking it with them. I like the fame and success that goes with the sport and I am happy for Mike McCallum and Simon Brown and hope they can get some big bouts that will make them some big bucks."

She likes music and a good movie, and is partial to Westerns.

When she was appointed Minister, Portia was ecstatic but she was also sad,

Portia is happy for Mike McCallum but doesn't like boxing.

for the person she loves most was not there to share that piece of history. "I was a daddy's girl. He always thought I was special."

The late Mr. Simpson was a man steeped in Shakespearean literature and he longed to name one of his girls Portia.

He took one look at his first-born girl and he said 'this is not Portia'. Other girls came but none of them was Portia.

"I understand when I was born my father looked at me and said 'this is Portia'."

■ *Wyvoly Gager, an investigative reporter and writer, works for a national daily in Kingston.*