

Manley's message from the grave

Ian Boyne



THERE IS no post-Independence decade fraught with as much tension, divisiveness, bitterness, class warfare as the 1970s. To this day, discussion on the 1970s reignites much of the drama and pain of that turbulent period.

Michael Manley was at the heart of it all. We can't have reflections on our 50 years of Independence without discussing Michael Manley and his role in post-Independence Jamaica. In my view, Michael Manley has been our most seminal prime minister, our sharpest in terms of intellectual breadth and our most perceptive in terms of his grasp of the scope of political Independence. His comprehensiveness of vision has never been surpassed. Already these words, I am sure, are generating enraged opposition. You can't be neutral about Michael Manley.

But there are some things which can be objectively and dispassionately established. There has been no post-Independence political leader who has privileged the issue of equality the way Michael Manley has. It was

appropriate, therefore, for Delano Franklyn, in putting together a collection of Manley's Budget speeches, to title his book **Michael Manley: The Politics of Equality**. Similarly, in her highly engaging work based on her doctoral thesis, the Cambridge and Boston College-educated academic Anna Perkins titled her work, **Justice as Equality: Michael Manley's Caribbean Vision of Justice**.

MUST-READ SPEECH

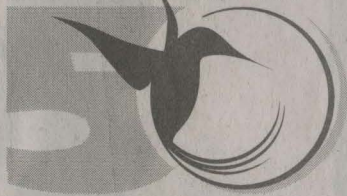
Manley's 1969 speech in Parliament, which is where Franklyn begins, is most instructive and should be read by everyone interested in Jamaican politics, especially as we celebrate Jamaica 50. Said Manley in that intellectually delightful presentation: "Every society that achieves greatness must begin with an idea of its own possibilities, must begin with a concept of what it wishes to become, must begin with a dream that becomes a focus for its aspirations, must begin with a vision of justice, above all, a vision of justice." Justice as equality, as Dr Perkins puts it. Manley, in that speech, dismissed the canard about

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In this 1969 Gleaner photograph, Then Opposition Leader Michael Manley gives a gift and a word of cheer to a patient at the Bustamante Children's Hospital.

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equality meaning equality of abilities, talents and possessions, etc. Manley was clear on what equality did not mean: "We do not mean a society in which every man is paid the same wages, regardless of the function he performs. We do not mean that everyone is born with the same talents, same character, same personality. We do not mean that everyone must drive the same car and share the same taste." And yet years after, we would hear people mouthing those same silly objections to Manley's

philosophy of egalitarianism.

But Manley saw clearly that an unequal society was a wasteful society; a society that impairs efficiency and order; a society which courts instability. The brilliance of Manley's intellectual grasp of these issues – from the 1960s – is reinforced when one is immersed in contemporary development literature. I am currently reading the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist at the World Bank, who just released his latest book, **The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers the Future**. Stiglitz does a masterly job of debunking Right-wing apologists for inequality, shatteringly showing the harms of inequality.

Says Stiglitz: "Inequality's apologists – and they are many – argue that giving more money to the top will benefit everyone, partly because it would lead to more growth. This is an idea called

trickle-down economics. It has a long pedigree – and has long been discredited." But long before it was discredited, in the Gilded Age of capitalism, Michael Manley saw it was a dead end.

In that highly perceptive 1969 speech, Manley said, "The system of self-perpetuating privilege is wasteful of human talent. This is so because it excludes vast areas of skill from full engagement in the working of the society and substitutes in the critical areas of industry and business a rule or hereditary succession." The "final retort of the Right," says 'The

Price of Inequality', "makes reference to an economic and moral justification of inequality accompanied by a claim that attempting to do anything about it will simply kill the golden goose and ... even the poor will suffer."

EQUAL TO THE TASK

Manley had to sharply contend with that view, but he was intellectually equal to the task. Indeed, there was no one to outgun him in any philosophical battle debate on equality and justice.

He had securely grounded his ideas of justice and equality in a

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progressive ideology with strong theological overtones, which theologian Dr Perkins artfully explores in her work 'Justice as Equality'. "The ethical dimensions of Manley's thoughts are rarely explored. Manley's ideas are worth exploring since they call for, and contribute to, arguments for making equality a central value in the political, as well as ideological, canons of the Jamaican people. His ideas are of enduring relevance for their impact on the development of political philosophy and ethics in the Caribbean region. Discussions of political ethics for the Caribbean, therefore, cannot ignore his vision but ought to begin with him as a major interlocutor," she says in her 2010 work.

Not only has someone of the stature of Joe Stiglitz come out with his work on inequality but another significant economic thinker, James K. Galbraith, son of the renowned economist John Kenneth Galbraith, has also just published his highly hailed work **Inequality and Instability: A Study of the World Economy Just Before the Great Crisis**. The issue of equity is one of the biggest issues in economics and development studies today. Manley had centre-staged this from the 1960s and came to power in 1972 with the commitment that better must come for the downtrodden masses.

Others have talked economic growth and privileged that, but Manley talked equity and saw economic growth as only a means to that end. He did not fetishise economic growth. Economic growth was not an end in itself. Indeed, in that 1969 speech, Michael Manley pointed to the growth that was taking place in the economy – along with growth in unemployment, inequality and social exclusion.

It was not by accident that Michael Manley, in the 1970s, developed the most comprehensive set of social legislation this country has ever seen and brought about the highest level of social consciousness ever. The 1970s was our most revolutionary period in terms

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of social advancement of the masses. Yes, there was impressive economic growth in the 1960s. We needed that as a base for social development.

Manley insisted that the fruits of that economic growth be equitably distributed. There can be no complete analysis of the progress of Jamaica over our 50 years without taking cognisance of this. No less a person than Manley's arch-rival and strident political opponent of the 1970s, Edward Phillip George Seaga, would later write in his memoirs that Manley's "social reforms, notwithstanding limited results in tangible performance, were of lasting value in the raising of social consciousness of the people. It was the rhetoric of Michael Manley that raised the bar of self-esteem and racial pride among people of African origin in continuation of Garvey's mission."

Now that is no small tribute from someone like Edward Seaga. He goes on in his book, *Edward Seaga: My Life and Leadership: Clash of Ideologies, 1930-1980*: "Manley's repeated references to the injustices of being poor and black ... created a significant shift in social awareness." This shift has to be acknowledged as we celebrate Jamaica 50. We can't let political bad-mindedness and mean-spiritedness make us do injustice to our history.

Manley's free-education policy alone would have been a lasting monument to his social engineering. There are so many people today who would not be able to make any contribution to this society; not able to contribute to our productivity or GDP were it not for his prying open that door. We don't have time to enumerate



Prime Minister Michael Manley listens intently to Ivy Richards, a poor woman of Majesty Pen, Kingston, as she outlines her problems to him at Jamaica House in August 1972. Manley has been credited as the prime minister who was most obsessed with promoting a philosophy of securing the rights of the poor and marginalised.

Manley's impressive social achievements, though at the end of the 1970s, faced with the harsh reality of imperialism and local reactionary politics – plus the People's National Party's (PNP) own intemperance and incompetence – they were whittled down.

Manley made a number of blunders and did not evince sufficient emotional intelligence. Some said he did not have a scientific appreciation of socialism and was a feeble Fabian (democratic) socialist. Manley did not make some critical alliances and did not manage the fears of the Jamaican people well enough. One

would need a whole column to delineate his errors and blunders. But there should be no questioning his vision of equality and justice, his quest for participatory democracy, his deep passion for transferring real power to the people, his unflinching commitment to democratisation at all levels.

SIGNAL IDEAS

In my view, there are two signal ideas which cemented Manley's towering stature among our political leaders. His deep and unsurpassed understanding of how our local prospects for growth were inextricably tied



Prime Minister Michael Manley addressing guests at the official opening of a Chinese trade exhibition at the National Arena in February 1975.

up with global economic and political reforms and his emphasis on equality.

Manley was a globalist. He knew Jamaica had no chance of making political Independence real without a just international political and economic order. That's why during his Second Coming in 1989, he was so feckless, so beaten, so lacking in that passion which drove him in previous decades. He had come to realise that any chance of a New International Economic Order was gone. The Reagan-Thatcher revolution had come. The Berlin Wall had fallen, and before he left office, the Soviet Union itself had crumbled. There was only one superpower standing. He realised he could not beat international city hall.

Today, his party in Government celebrates 50 years of independence while awaiting the International Monetary Fund to tell it how to proceed. Don't scoff at the PNP's predicament. It is Jamaica's predicament. It's the reality any party would face. Manley's advocacy for a New

International Economic Order, his work in the Non-Aligned Movement, his ceaseless work as an international statesman – the country's most brilliant and decorated – was tied to his overarching mission of justice and equality. There would be no "socialism in one country". No other political leader has articulated the inexorable connection between the local and the global; none has understood how this centre-periphery nexus constrains our development.

From a consequentialist point of view, Manley was a failure. But from a Kantian perspective, he was a success. He articulated a moral vision and obeyed what Kant would call the Categorical Imperative. I salute this giant on our 50th anniversary. We must listen to his message from the grave.

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