

Tribute to the late President Hugh Desmond Hoyte

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I can't remember ever meeting Desmond before his appointment as a technocrat Minister. I may have seen him before, because, by that time, he had already risen to prominence as an attorney-at-law. I first met him shortly after his appointment. At the time, I was a CARICOM official, and when he assumed the over-arching portfolio of Minister of Development, I began to develop a working relationship with him, with respect to CARICOM matters relevant to his Ministry. Our relationship grew much closer when I myself was appointed in 1978 as technocrat Minister of Trade and Industry.

Two images of Desmond hang prominently in the pictorial gallery of my mind. One is an image of him as a Minister; the other is an image of Desmond, the man.

The first image is of Desmond chairing a meeting of the monitoring committee of the cabinet, in his capacity as Minister of Development. I was attending the meeting for the first time, as a new member of the committee, following my appointment as Minister of Trade. The function of the committee was to review the programmes and finances of the public corporations. I could never forget how Desmond performed that day. As he probed the figures, interrogating the officials of the corporations, he displayed an uncanny understanding of the issues of accounting and finance. He demanded explanations for every figure he thought questionable, for every decision he considered deficient in terms of the problems addressed, and for every perceived weakness or failure in the operation of the corporations. He showed little patience for vague and evasive responses, no tolerance for any appearance of incompetence, and an unyielding passion for integrity in public management. For me, as a new Minister, it was an intimidating performance, which left me questioning myself whether, with all my years in the field of economics, I could rise to the standard that he demonstrated that day. He was obviously a very bright man. I learnt later that economics was one of the subjects that he studied for his B.A. degree of the University of London and that, at the age of 22, he was the youngest person in Guyana to have obtained this degree as an external student.

The second picture offers a glimpse of Desmond, the man, an image that may surprise any one who knew him only as a Minister. This image was developed on a Tuesday afternoon in 1980, after one of the weekly cabinet meetings, when the Prime Minister and Ministers, as was the custom in those days, gathered around the swimming pool at the Prime Minister's Vlissengen road residence. The gathering was almost like a ritualistic event orchestrated by the Prime Minister who, as it seemed, wanted to ensure that his stressed out ministers had some exercise at least once a week, by swimming or splashing around in the pool, or riding the exercise bike in the changing room. I had a vague feeling that the real agenda was to provide the Prime Minister with opportunities for an exchange of views on various issues, in a more relaxed and informal atmosphere.

In the midst of our informal conversation, entered the younger of Desmond's two daughters, the then eleven-year Amanda. She looked around rather bashfully, said "excuse me please" and jumped into her father's lap, wrapped her hands around his neck and started kissing him and whispering in his ears. Desmond became oblivious of the world around him while fondly caressing his daughter and reciprocating her kisses, as one would do to a three year old kid. All conversation stopped, and for a good while, I became a silent witness to an amazing display of fatherly love and tenderness by a man who was seen by many as being very formal in his demeanour and almost military in his persona.

This was Desmond, the man. The man you met when you paid a social visit to his home. A very simple, uncomplicated and gentle individual, a loving father, a caring and devoted husband. He was an omnivorous reader, an amazing raconteur, and an ardent lover of music, both classical and jazz, a passion we both shared.

Not surprisingly, at times, Desmond, the man, would clash with Desmond, the Minister. What would be the outcome in such cases? I will relate an incident that would reveal most tellingly the true nature of the man. I was in his suite at the Hilton hotel in Bridgetown, Barbados, along with a good friend of his, Dr Gladstone Mitchell, a Guyanese physician, who was attached to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Bridgetown. I was a CARICOM official at the time and we were in Barbados to attend a CARICOM meeting which ended on the previous day. Desmond had already packed, ready to leave for Guyana in about an hour's time. The telephone rang and Prime Minister Barrow of Barbados was on the line to say that he was coming over to bring a parcel for "ODO," as Prime Minister Burnham was known to his close friends; and the Barbados P.M. was Mr Burnham's very close friend since their student days in the 1940s at the London School of Economics. The Barbados P.M. soon arrived with a parcel in a carry-on bag. Desmond asked him in almost inaudible tones what was in the package. Prime Minister Barrow responded, with less vocal restraint. After the Barbados PM left, Desmond turned to us and exclaimed: "I am not carrying that to Guyana." Gladstone interjected that he did not believe that any customs official would think of examining the package and, at any rate, there should be no concern, since individuals were allowed to carry in modest quantities of banned foodstuffs for personal consumption. Desmond unhesitatingly responded that, he considered it his duty to set an example, and since the items were not available to the general public in Guyana, he would not take them even for himself. He said, if necessary he would explain to Burnham. He left the package with Gladstone, who seemed quite happy with the decision and did not press the issue any further. I never thought of asking Desmond what Burnham said.

Desmond had an obsessive concern for correctness, morality and integrity in everything he did. He was not a man who would seek to exploit any special privilege. His conscience was his constant guide.

Desmond started off as a reluctant politician. He never wanted the job. He wanted badly to remain in his profession in which he was already a shining star. But once he became a Minister, he dedicated his life totally to the service of his country. Lord Jenkins, the former British Labour Minister who died recently, once said that, to become a Prime Minister, one has to be driven by an obsessive ruthlessness, a quality that he did not have. Roy Jenkins, with all his enormous political talent, never rose to be Prime Minister or even a leader of the Labour party.

If indeed, obsessive ruthlessness is what it takes to be the head of Government, Desmond would never have become President of Guyana. He became President by the quiet and uncontroversial process of constitutional succession. His ascendancy was a truly epochal event in the history of Guyana. He became President at a time of enormous difficulties for the nation's economy. And not long after taking command, and throughout his presidency, he made decisions that have changed the direction of the history and economy of Guyana, hopefully forever. I do not think that any other leader, at that time, would have taken the radical and courageous decisions that he took. It is my firm belief that his decision to liberalise the economy and to privatize state enterprises that hung like albatrosses around the neck of the Government, was, strategically, one of the most important public policy decisions in our post-colonial history.

Desmond had a passionate commitment to the upliftment of the poor and disadvantaged. He was obsessed with the desire to give the ordinary people a meaningful role in decisions that have a direct bearing on their communities. I say this from personal experience, for oftentimes he stood up against me in defence of regional officials that worked within the area of my responsibility as Minister of Agriculture, in the belief that I had too little faith in the ordinary man and showed too little patience with missteps in their efforts to manage their communities within the regional system. Of course, I did not agree with his perception. His was clearly not a political stance. Two years after I ceased to be a Minister and moved to the Inter-American Development Bank here in Washington D.C., Desmond took over the portfolio of Minister of Agriculture, which I last held, and

he had to deal with some of the very individuals on whose behalf he had interceded. One day, when I visited with him in his office, he was gracious enough to tell me that I was right in my judgement of those officials and that he was compelled to take steps to have two of them relieved of their duties.

One of the most troubling problems in Guyana is the problem of race. Desmond's greatest ambition was to promote genuine racial harmony. As President, he tried his best. In fact, he tried so hard, that some people began to call him names. This must have been very painful to him.

I do not say that his presidency was without mistakes. I have worked with and for every head of Government from 1961, when I served as Assistant Secretary in Dr Jagan's Ministry, up to 1994, when I left my last job in Guyana, as Chairman of the Public Utilities Commission. Many may disagree with me, but, in my humble opinion, all the leaders with whom I worked were, in their own ways, very great men. And they have all, in their times, made mistakes, big and small. Winston Churchill said "all great men make mistakes. Napoleon forgot Bluecher, and I forgot Goschen." The results were disastrous in both cases. The Englishman, Edward John Phelps, puts it even more poignantly: "The man who makes no mistakes does not usually make any thing." Desmond, like all great men, did many great things for Guyana and he had his share of mistakes. But these mistakes pale into triviality and insignificance, when judged against his momentous achievements.

In Guyana, we have developed an almost perverted tendency to judge our political leaders by the mistakes they have made, ignoring the good they have done for the country, depending on where we stand in the political landscape. If history is written solely on the basis of the mistakes of governments and their leaders, it would be debased to what Shakespeare described as "a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing." When, in our partisan and irrational zeal, we misrepresent or distort the deeds of our leaders, and falsify or destroy our historical record, we demean our nation and betray the generations yet unborn.

President Truman said in 1958 that a "statesman is a politician who has died ten or fifteen years." I fervently hope that it wouldn't take that long for our scribes and historians to recognize Hugh Desmond Hoyte as a truly great leader, reformer and statesman. He was the right man for his time.

Less than five years after the scene I described of Desmond and Amanda by the swimming pool, both of his daughters were gone, victims of a most horrible crash on the highway to Linden. They were motoring with their mother to be with their father who had gone to the bauxite town for an important official engagement, as is a custom in political life. I do not think that Mrs Hoyte has fully recovered, physically and emotionally, from that tragic event. You will understand, I am sure, why the image of Desmond and Amanda has haunted me so much over the years. The loss of his only two children and the physical and traumatic injuries suffered by his wife are absolutely the greatest sacrifice that a man could ever bear in the service of his country; even greater than the sacrifice of his own life.

No other politician has given so much, personally and otherwise, in the service of Guyana, as Hugh Desmond Hoyte. We should be eternally grateful to him for what he has done for Guyana, in his time and for future generations. Let his death be a challenge to every Guyanese, to all our scribes and all our historians, to recognize the true greatness of the man and to celebrate his life and honour his memory. We should honour him in death, as he deserves to be honoured in life, as an undying embodiment and symbol of our quest for identity and legitimacy as a true nation of many peoples.

My heartfelt sympathy and that of my wife and three children go out to Mrs Joyce Hoyte and to all of her and Desmond's relatives.

And may his soul rest in peace, forever.

