

Commentary

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The Truth of the Matter

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A Farewell Tribute to George Odlum

"In the politics of this country I am a man more sinned against than sinning"-George Odlum

"I want to say something about Brother George. When Brother George came to Soucis we did not know anything," ... "We were ignorant. We were mute. They strike . . . for a little bit of money. At the same time he was doing things for us, he took the teargas. He did everything to give us strength." -Lydia Willie, St Lucia banana farmer.

"What killed my father was the fact that he was dying and he couldn't see a spiritual redemption in this country. What killed my father, and he died with tears in his eyes, although he couldn't speak, was the fact that he was moving on. And he said to me Yasmin, 'I made a mistake: I thought politics was all but it isn't about politics. It's about redeeming your country from the inside out. It is about creating communities where people love one another, where political differences don't divide us in a way that we cannot say that you are my brother and I am responsible for you!'-Yasmin Odlum, George Odlum's daughter

As I did last November when Tim Hector died, I had to break the news of George Odlum's passing to my elder, Eusi Kwayana. Last Saturday night after forgetting for two weeks, I finally told Eusi that Odlum was dying. I sensed a moment of reflection on Eusi's part; after all he is the elder Caribbean radical having to see the troops die on the battlefield. A mere eight hours later, George Odlum was dead. He was 69 years old, an old man by Caribbean standards, yet to us younger travelers George was a young man.



As I reflected on the George Odlum I was first introduced to through Rickey Singh's Caribbean Contact and later his own Crusader newspaper, I could not help thinking, perhaps harshly, that the Caribbean is simultaneously a blessed and an unkind place. I reached for Walter Rodney and CLR James and George Padmore and and Tim Hector and I asked: Does the Caribbean know them or care to know them? I thought of my comrades who are still very much alive-Bro Eusi, Andaiye, Moses Bhagwan, Clive Thomas, Rupert Roopnarine, Bonita Harris-do we know them? When will we claim or reclaim them?

George Odlum was one of St Lucia's and the Caribbean's most vocal and committed proponent of genuine people's empowerment. Yet he seems to have died a somewhat disappointed man with fresh memories of humiliation by the very people he loved and sought to help move into the empowerment zone. He is not the first Caribbean patriot to depart this life with mixed feelings about where our Caribbean has been headed. This tribute to Odlum, therefore, is not a chronicle of all of his political journey. Rather it's a call to our nation and region to reflect deeply on how we have allowed tribal politics to consume us.

Few regions of the world have produced so many high quality minds as the Caribbean has done in its short history. Yet no other region in the world has sacrificed more of its finest talents at the altar of tribal politics than the Anglophone Caribbean. This is perhaps one of the major reasons for the persistent underdevelopment of a region. It is as if we are afraid of our own liberation, and so must slaughter the prophets of liberation at every twist and turn, only to reclaim them at the point of death and then throw them to the wolves again after the funeral. But worst of all we justify our

actions in the most perverse way. We did it to Rodney, and Bishop, and Hector, and James. The big question is why-are we fatally flawed?

While other factors play pivotal roles in the developmental process, the human factor is indispensable and no country or region or community advances without utilizing its indigenous ideas and actions born of its own experiences and nurtured by its own hands and minds. To be fair, our Caribbean has always shown the potential to break out of its inherited condition of despair and powerlessness, but it then succeeds in self-destructing when its time to make the big leap.

One of the worst manifestations of this self-destruction is our track record of demonizing, lynching, and criminalizing those in our midst who dare to ask hard questions of our society and challenge us to live out our true potential in the spirit of sisterhood and nationhood. In eulogizing his friend Tim Hector last November, George Odlum himself lamented this problem when in reference to their political work he said "We did this in the face of tremendous odds and spirited opposition from a society whose philistinism has become a by-word." This is a stinging indictment from a man whose entire life and being were given to the struggle for the liberation of the underprivileged. But it's an indictment that reeks of truth and should be heeded by all of us-- commoners and leaders.

George Odlum was an influential actor on the St. Lucian political stage for more than three decades. He is best remembered as the St. Lucian's public figure that stood up to and challenged the post-colonial order that had emerged in the wake of independence. Odlum and his comrades asked what kind of society we wanted to fashion out of the constitutional independence we had won. But that question frightened the daylight out of the guardians of independence who were busy socializing the society to be anti-free. Thus the George Odlums became the scapegoats and the enemies of both right and left.

Unlike most of his radical left wing counterparts in the Caribbean, Odlum quickly moved to conventional party politics. Like most of them he was baptized in the Black Power Movement of which his FORUM was an important link. Like NJM, ACLM, Abeng, NJAC, ASCRIA, Ratoon, and MAO, Odlum's FORUM was the forum for the public education of the Caribbean masses about society and politics, and justice and freedom.

But in the mid 1970's Odlum plunged into mobilization for the St. Lucia Labor Party. He was the live wire of the party's victory at the polls in 1979. By going with the SLP, Odlum was doing what some of the left wing in Jamaica were doing in the Peoples National Party and what Maurice Bishop's NJM was doing in Grenada when it entered into an electoral alliance with Herbert Blaize's party in 1976: trying to create change from the inside the conventional parties. This was a deviation from the dominant radical left tendency to steer clear of conventional parties and electoral politics. This to my mind was George Odlum's principal political mistake-party politics, in particular electoral politics, in the Caribbean, have since independence been the graveyard of all positive initiatives. The traditional Caribbean political party, by its very nature cannot and will not facilitate the vision of the George Odlums.

I am sure George Odlum understood this, but he may have reasoned that he could simultaneously function both inside and outside of conventional politics. Some pundits have read Odlum's move to conventional party politics as a reach for power rather than a movement for unity across ideological lines, which it really was. Hence he was to suffer the first of his political betrayals when the promise of the Prime Ministership was withdrawn. His handling of the matter further forced many to conclude that he was more interested in power than progress. History will one day make a distinction between a public display of disappointment from a passion for principle.

When Odlum subsequently left the SLP, St. Lucians were not kind to him. His Progressive Labor Party (PLP) made little impact on the electorate, yet George Odlum continued to be in the forefront of St. Lucia's politics. His detractors could not deny him his primary role as the country's public educator. Through the pages of his newspaper, the Crusader, and from the Castries market steps, Odlum continued to advocate for real empowerment and a new political culture and to mobilize for change. He could not be ignored even when he was electorally rejected, because he spoke truth to

the powerful and the powerless. Some agree that this was George Odlum's calling; that the Caribbean radical left is best suited to advocacy and political education rather than managing government and competing for votes. The Caribbean, to its eternal peril, came to believe this myth and proceeded to marginalize many of its finest thinkers and patriots.

As the Cold War came to an end, Odlum and his fellow travelers, were released from the anti-communist shackles imported from the USA. The truth is that many of the radical leftists were not Moscow-communists; they were Caribbean nationalists and working class patriots. George Odlum fitted squarely into this category. He was never given to communist platitudes; he communicated in the indigenous language.

After losing power to John Compton's UWP in 1982, the SLP remained out of government for the next 15 years. Once again George Odlum was part of its revival. Along with a group that called itself New Labor, George and Old Labor were able to present a united SLP to the electorate with Kenny Anthony as leader. The SLP won and George was appointed Foreign Minister. From this position he set about charting a new foreign policy for St. Lucia, the OECS and the Caribbean. His radical background made him an effective advocate for underprivileged countries. The image of George Odlum leaving the confines of officialdom to ground with the protestors at Seattle will forever be a telling demonstration of where he stood in relation to the people.

For all his great work on foreign policy, the domestic situation remained Odlum primary concern. From as early as 1998 when I interviewed him for a television program he hinted that all was not well with his relationship with his New Labor colleagues. He felt they were uncomfortable with his presence and he in turn was concerned with their seemingly lack of concern for the real issues that faced the people. By 2000, he was criticizing his government in public and by 2001 he was out of the government through a combination of resignation and firing.

Before the parting of ways, George had begun to explore the possibility of a national alliance of Old Labor, Compton's United Workers Party (UWP) and independents. He had come to the conclusion that party politics or political tribalism was tearing St. Lucia and the Caribbean apart. For him power sharing in the form of a national government was the answer. Some questioned this move. How can a man walk away from a powerful position in government to pursue a mere dream? How can a man seek unity with a party that once persecuted him? Others concluded that it was Odlum's crave for the number one position that drove him to the alliance. What was forgotten was that George had served as UN Ambassador under the UWP in the name of putting country above party. In the end, the alliance never got off the ground, despite public curiosity. The old politics won the day as both tribes were back to their prisons.

This no doubt saddened George Odlum. He lost his deposit as St. Lucians voted for business as usual. It must be noted that George Odlum won elections only when he was aligned to one of the tribes-this is the nature of our politics; principle, policies and vision mean little when the battle for state power kicks in. Leftists and democrats generally do not criticize the choices of the people. Yet the people must be made aware when they wittingly or unwittingly undermine their own empowerment.

George Odlum's political life is partly a tragedy--a Caribbean tragedy. He reportedly lamented in his last days that he mistakenly believed that politics was all. But he must have known that mistake aside he made a difference Farewell Caribbean treasure-crusader, your life and living were not in vain.

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