

In memoriam: George Odlum (1939-2003)

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One of St Lucia's most colourful politicians, George Odlum, passed away on Sunday 28th September in hospital, where he was being treated for pancreatic cancer. Odlum was the champion of grassroots socialism in St Lucia and the wider Caribbean. He was a founding member of Forum: a people's movement intent on raising political awareness among the poor, black masses of St Lucia.

In 1979, Odlum was part of the St Lucia Labour Party that defeated John Compton's United Workers' Party. The subsequent leadership struggle between Odlum and Louisy, however, led to the demise of this SLP government in 1982. It wasn't until 1997, when Dr Kenny Anthony's 'New Labour' government came to power, that George Odlum once again became part of the government of St Lucia, this time as minister of Foreign Affairs.

Reflecting on this period, Odlum said that he had been filled with "tremendous hope" following the 1997 landslide victory for the SLP. Odlum initially saw his own role in this new government as a modest one. "There was a young team that I was helping to put out, then I would fall away after two or three years and go to my retreat and read and write and so on. It was my dream. But it was clear very soon that things were not happening and it was very clear that we were making a lot of mistakes due to inexperience and the dream team was turning into something like a nightmare ticket".

The imminent breach first became apparent in Odlum's budget speech of April 2000, when Odlum castigated his SLP colleagues. "In three measly years", asserted Odlum, the SLP government had somehow managed to alienate "all the important sectors of the community", including the media, private sector, farmers, public servants, eachers, churches, trusted Labour stalwarts, the opposition and some regional colleagues. But despite his criticism, Odlum chose to remain part of the government, claiming that "a soldier can be out of step with his entire batallion provided that he is marching to the right drum-beat".



Later in that same year 2000, however, Odlum increasingly flirted with the idea of setting up a Government of National Unity - something which did nothing to improve relations with his government colleagues. "There is a need for a great deal of healing in this country", Odlum stated in November 2000 and "It is easy for us as ministers to continue to receive our salaries and ignore the fundamental problems which impede the development of our nation", he was quoted as saying the following December.

The 'New Labour' of which Odlum had been so hopeful in 1997, in his opinion had turned into something of "a mutual admiration society" by 2001. In Odlum's perception, 'Old Labour' "was forged out of the trade union movement and as a result of the struggles of the people. For within the frail frame of George FL Charles lies the real heart of Labour". 'New Labour', on the other hand, Odlum sees as originating from the corridors of the University of the West Indies, "where a group of young men banded together and decided that they were a government in exile. These men invited those who were in St. Lucia, (elements of the PLP, CDP, The National Front) and put their emphasis on their heads as distinct from their hearts (the cerebral aspect of politicking and government). Odlum lamented at the time (April 2001) that there was a tendency on the part of the new regime to alienate people like him who were of the old school. According to Odlum, there was something in the psyche of the 'New Labour' government which refused to face the reality of things.

Shortly after this, Odlum came out in support of a new political movement: the National Unity Front. Prominent in this were then UWP-leader Dr Morella Joseph and, ironically, Odlum's old-time

political enemy, Sir John Compton. Then in March 2001, the inevitable happened: Odlum resigned from his post as minister of Foreign Affairs in the Kenny Anthony government - mere hours before being fired. Bitter words followed, particularly from the desk of Dr Anthony's administrative attache, Tennyson Joseph. Joseph described George Odlum as "an obsessive power-grabber bent on destroying himself, the government and the country in his blind quest to fulfill his selfish political ambitions. Odlum's current political strategy is to play the role of a sad victim, treated badly and unfairly by an unfriendly Cabinet of hostile colleagues eager to excise him from the body politic. His political persona has therefore completed the full circle from the rough revolutionary firebrand of the 1970s left, to a 'poor me' cry-baby of the school play-ground variety. ... Odlum had continued to act as if he should be showered with love and understanding from his colleagues at a time when his remaining political energy is being spent to bring about their political destruction. ... Like the typical 'spoilt child' he refuses to see his decision to join the UWP as an act of supreme betrayal and therefore worthy of censure".

With elections due in May 2002 at the latest, the country experienced an upsurge in political debate over the second half of 2001. The National Alliance for Unity re-launched itself after one or two false starts, as a combination of the UWP and 'Old Labour'. For a while, it seemed as if the SLP would face serious competition at the polls but internal leadership contentions within the Alliance caused it to lose public trust and when elections finally came, in December 2001, the SLP renewed its strong mandate. In Castries South, George Odlum lost resoundingly to Menissa Rambally. It signalled his exit from St Lucia's political stage - if not from its public life.

Until the very last week of his earthly life, George remained an icon in many people's minds and hearts: the man of words (for years, Odlum owned and edited the Crusader newspaper), the Oxford scholar who became the first black student union leader at his university, the first-class sportsman, the writer and theatre-maker who only last week received an anthology of poetry dedicated to him. This book, 'Roseau Valley and other poems for Brother George Odlum' contains contributions by Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, Michael Gilkes, Edward Baugh, Hunter Francois, Stanley French, Charles Cadet, Melania Daniel, George 'Fish' Alphonse, Dunstan St. Omer, Virginia Henry, Llewlyn Xavier, Corine George, Dame Sesenne Descartes and Ronald 'Boo' Hinkson.

A rebel with a cause, George Oldum has passed on from this life but will live on in the history of St Lucia and in the hearts of its people.