

TRIBUTE TO
LADY BUSTAMANTE

IT IS A SAD REFLECTION ON OUR SOCIETY THAT SO MANY PEOPLE STILL ASK, OR WONDER, ABOUT THE HISTORY OF LADY BUSTAMANTE, EVEN UNTIL THIS DAY AND EVEN THOUGH SHE BECAME A LADY OF GREAT FAME, ONE OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING WOMEN IN JAMAICA, INDEED A MATRIARCH OF THE NATION.

THIS IS A FAILING IN OUR SOCIETY, WHERE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES EVERYONE KNOWS EVERYONE, BUT OUTSIDE OF THAT ENVIRONMENT, IT IS POSSIBLE TO LIVE A LIFETIME WITHOUT KNOWING YOUR NEIGHBOR'S GIVEN NAME.

AFTER 50 YEARS OF KNOWING LADY BUSTAMANTE, BEGINNING WITH THE EARLY DAYS WHEN SHE WAS GLADYS LONGBRIDGE, I HOPE THIS CEREMONY WILL INCLUDE A CELEBRATION OF HER EARLY LIFE, PARTICULARLY SINCE HER JOURNEY WAS A FULFILLMENT OF THE JAMAICAN DREAM OF RURAL PEOPLE: TO WORK AND ASPIRE TO SUCCEED.

SHE WAS A PRODUCT OF A DEEP RURAL LOCATION, A SMALL VILLAGE IN WESTMORELAND, CALLED PARSON REID, WHICH WAS SERVED BY A SINGLE ROCKY, POT- HOLED ROAD.

SHE LIVED WITH GRANDPARENTS, HARD-WORKING, GOD-FEARING PEOPLE WHO FARMED THE LAND, INSISTED ON ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL AND WORSHIP ON SUNDAYS. THEY DEMANDED GOOD MANNERS AND GOOD BEHAVIOR FROM THEIR PROGENY. SCHOOL WAS A CONTINUATION OF THE PROCESS OF THEIR CHARACTER MOULDING, BACKED BY EDUCATIONAL TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE.

IN THIS UPBRINGING, YOUNG GLADYS LONGBRIDGE ACQUIRED SKILLS, PASSING THE 2ND JAMAICA LOCAL EXAM, THE SCHOOL LEAVING EXAM FOR GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS AT THAT TIME, ENOUGH TO ENABLE HER TO BE A TEACHER -TRAINEE. SHE ALSO

LEARNED HOW TO PLAY THE ORGAN, FULFILLING
HER PASSION FOR MUSIC. HER SKILL WAS
WELCOMED BY THE LITTLE MORAVIAN CHURCH IN
HER DISTRICT OF ASHTON, WHERE SHE PLAYED ON
SUNDAYS.

WITH THESE TWO SKILLS: A SOUND EDUCATION AND
UNMISTAKABLE MUSICAL TALENT AND WITH THE
FORTITUDE OF AN UPRIGHT UPBRINGING, GLADYS
LONGBRIDGE WENT ON TO TUTORIAL
COLLEGE IN KINGSTON TO ACQUIRE SECRETARIAL
TRAINING, A FIELD IN WHICH SHE EXCELLED.

BUT DESPITE BEING TRAINED TO TAKE HER PLACE IN
THE WORLD OF WORK, ON GRADUATING FROM
TUTORIAL DISAPPOINTMENT AWAITED. WORK WAS

HARD TO FIND, PARTICULARLY FOR A YOUNG WOMAN WITH HER COMPLEXION AND BACKGROUND. NEWSPAPER ADS IN THE GLEANER AT THAT TIME SPECIFIED "WHITE" GIRLS FOR THE ADMINISTRATIVE JOBS FOR WHICH SHE WAS TRAINED, OR, THERE WAS AN UNWRITTEN RULE OF THE ESTABLISHMENT THAT THESE JOBS WERE RESERVED.

AFTER A FRUSTRATING STINT IN MONTEGO BAY, SHE RETURNED TO KINGSTON TO TRY HER LUCK AGAIN.

THIS TIME FORTUNE WAS WITH HER. SHE OBTAINED A JOB AT THE ARLINGTON HOUSE HOTEL AND RESTAURANT AS A CASHIER, TYPIST AND CLERK.

THIS WAS MORE IN KEEPING WITH WHAT SHE WAS

TRAINED TO DO. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY,
ARLINGTON HOUSE, BEING ON EAST QUEEN STREET
AND LOCATED AT THE INTERSECTION WITH DUKE
STREET, WAS AN INFORMAL MEETING PLACE FOR
POLITICAL FIGURES WHO GATHERED THERE TO EAT
AND DRINK AND DISCUSS POLITICAL MATTERS.

HERE, SHE OVER HEARD THE ARGUMENTS OF MEN
WHO WERE TO BECOME LEADERS OF A NEW
JAMAICA.

ALEXANDER BUSTAMANTE WOULD STAND OUT
AMONGST THEM IN PHYSICAL STATURE AND
DYNAMIC PERSONALITY.

GLADYS LONGBRIDGE OVER HEARD THE COMMENTS
ABOUT COLONIAL REPRESSION, BUT MORE SO ABOUT

THE OPPRESSION OF WORKERS WHOSE COURSE WAS
LOUDLY CHAMPIONED BY BUSTAMANTE.

THE PLIGHT OF DOCK WORKERS AT SAV LA MAR WAS
ALREADY FIXED IN HER MIND AS SHE HAD
OBSERVED THE CONDITIONS OF

WORK THERE. THIS GAVE HER A READY
UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEMS IN KINGSTON
WHICH WERE CHALLENGED BY BUSTAMANTE.

FATE AGAIN TURNED HER WAY WHEN SHE
ANSWERED A CALL FOR A JOB WITH NO OTHER THAN
ALEXANDER BUSTAMANTE AT HIS OFFICE ON DUKE
STREET. THIS OPPORTUNITY ALLOWED HER TO

USE HER STENOGRAPHIC AND TYPING SKILLS AT LAST, BECAUSE BUSTAMANTE WAS A FURIOUS LETTER WRITER TO THE PRESS ON A RANGE OF CONDITIONS WHICH AFFECTED THE POOR.

BUT MORESO, IT OPENED THE DOOR TO A GREATER OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH A MAN WHO WAS DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHERS, A MAN WHO WAS DESTINED TO LEAD THE NATION.

THE YEARS AHEAD IN THE CAREER OF YOUNG MISS LONGBRIDGE WERE DESTINED TO LEAP OVER THE DECADE OF FROLIC THAT YOUNG WOMEN USUALLY ENJOYED IN THEIR TWENTIES BEFORE REACHING THEIR 30TH BIRTHDAY.

BY THE TIME SHE REACHED THAT MILESTONE SHE WAS ALREADY SHOULDERING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF WOMEN TWICE HER AGE. SHE HAD ALREADY TRAVELLED WITH BUSTAMANTE TO EVERY TROUBLE SPOT IN THE ISLAND, WHERE THE UPRISING OF THE PEOPLE WAS BEGINNING THAT EPIC MISSION OF SWEEPING AWAY THE INHUMANE CONDITIONS OF LIFE FOR THE WORKING CLASS.

SHE HAD WITNESSED POLICE BRUTALITY. SHE SAW BUSTAMANTE BARE HIS CHEST AT PARADE, AS HE TOLD THE POLICE, "SHOOT ME AND LEAVE THE PEOPLE!"..AN EPIC DISPLAY FROM WHICH POOR PEOPLE FOUND A TRUE DEFENDER.

GLADYS LONGBRIDGE WITNESSED THE ARREST OF BUSTAMANTE AS HE WAS TAKEN TO JAIL BY THE POLICE AND, LATER, WAS THERE FOR HIM WHEN HE WAS DETAINED FOR 17 MONTHS.

ALL THESE HISTORIC EVENTS WERE EXPERIENCED BY A YOUNG WOMAN IN HER TWENTIES, WHO FOUND HERSELF SHOULDERING THE IMMENSE RESPONSIBILITIES OF BEING CONFIDANTE TO BUSTAMANTE, THE MOST POWERFUL, FEARLESS AND DYNAMIC MAN IN THE COUNTRY, AND TO BE CARETAKER OF HIS INTERESTS IN PROTECTING THE BITU FROM A HOSTILE TAKEOVER WHILE HE WAS IN DETENTION.

IT WAS AN EXTRA-ORDINARY ACCOMPLISHMENT TO HAVE RISEN SO QUICKLY TO “THE HEIGHTS OF GREAT MEN REACHED AND KEPT”, AS LONGFELLOW WROTE, WHILE YET IN HER EARLY YEARS.

BY 1943, THE FORMATION OF THE JAMAICA LABOUR PARTY WAS THE NEXT GIANT STEP FORWARD.

AGAIN, MISS LONGBRIDGE HAD TO EXTEND HER RESPONSIBILITIES TO BE AT BUSTAMANTE’S SIDE, WHILE HE EXPANDED THE SCOPE OF HIS MISSION TO NATIONAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH A SWEEPING ELECTORAL VICTORY IN THE FIRST GENERAL ELECTION OF 1944.

DURING THIS PERIOD, GLADYS LONGBRIDGE WAS FULLY RECOGNIZED AS AN INSTITUTION IN THE

BUSTAMANTE INDUSTRIAL TRADE UNION AND THE JAMAICA LABOUR PARTY.

AS THE EVOLUTION OF THESE TWIN INSTITUTIONS ADVANCED WITH TIME, AND BUSTAMANTE WITH AGE, MISS LONGBRIDGE BECAME HIS ENCYCLOPEDIA OF NAMES AND DATES. HE WAS FOND OF SAYING FROM A PLATFORM “WHATEVER I AM I OWE IT TO THIS YOUNG LADY,” TO THE ROAR OF APPROVAL OF THE CROWD.

NO WOMAN IN THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF JAMAICA HAD EVER MATURED IN RESPONSIBILITY SO QUICKLY, GROWN IN STATURE SO POWERFULLY AND ASSUMED THE ROLE OF CONFIDANTE, ADVISOR AND TRUSTEE TO SO POWERFUL A LEADER, WHILE

REMAINING LOVED BY THE MULTITUDE AND
HUMBLE TO ALL. SHE WAS TRULY A MOTHER TO THE
NATION.

WHEN SHE WED SIR ALEXANDER BUSTAMANTE IN
SEPTEMBER, 1962, TO BECOME LADY BUSTAMANTE
AND WIFE OF THE PRIME MINISTER, NOTHING
CHANGED.

LITTLE THINGS WHICH TOUCH THE HEART, OFTEN
BECOME BIG THINGS THAT IMPRESS THE MIND.
THESE STILL CONTINUED.

I BECAME ACCUSTOMED ON VISITING TUCKER
AVENUE ON A SATURDAY MORNING TO SEE LADY B,

AS SHE CAME TO BE KNOWN AFTER MARRIAGE,
PACKING A BIG BASKET OF GROCERIES. THERE WAS
NO NEED TO ASK THE PURPOSE; IT WAS FOR SOME
GRIEF STRICKEN WOMAN THEY HAD READ OR HEARD
ABOUT WHO HAD LOST A CHILD, OR A HOME, OR
WHO HAD SUFFERED SOME ACCIDENT OR PERSONAL
AFFLICTION. IT WAS ALWAYS A CASE OF GRIEF AND
IT WAS USUALLY A WOMAN.

MOST TIMES SIR ALEXANDER AND HERSELF WOULD
DELIVER THE UNSOLICITED GIFT ALONG WITH SOME
MONEY. THE JOY THEY RECEIVED IN HELPING THE
POOR WAS THE ONLY THANKS THEY WANTED FOR
THEIR BENEFACTION.

SUCH WAS THE GOODNESS OF HEART OF A WOMAN WHO DEEPLY CARED FOR HOW THE POOR SURVIVED. ON A PERSONAL NOTE, I TREASURED GREATLY THE IMPROMTU OCCASIONS, BEFORE INDEPENDENCE, WHEN I WOULD BE ASKED TO JOIN THEM FOR “A STEAK DINNER” AT THE CHIEF’S FAVOURITE RESTAURANT, A COZY SPOT IN TANGERINE PLACE, OFF HALF WAY TREE ROAD. THESE WERE SMALL INTIMATE TRIOS WHERE I COULD BRIEF THEM ON MY BACKGROUND AND WORK IN VILLAGE AND INNER CITY LIFE, WITH BUSTAMANTE NODDING IN RECOGNITION OF HIS WEST KINGSTON DAYS AND MISS LONGBRIDGE SMILING FROM MEMORIES OF HER OWN UPBRINGING IN PARSON REID.

SIR ALEXANDER WOULD TELL ME ABOUT THE
NUTRITIONAL SKILLS HE LEARNED FROM A
HOSPITAL

IN NEW YORK AND RELATE SOME OF HIS EXPLOITS
ABROAD. MISS LONGBRIDGE WOULD LISTEN AND
IMPISHLY WINK ME WHEN BUSTA'S STORIES GOT
TOO OUTLANDISH.

THE LIFE OF LADY B DID TAKE A TURN FOR THE
WORSE WITHIN TWO YEARS OF THE INDEPENDENCE
FOR WHICH BUSTAMANTE LED THE WAY.

THE TOLL OF THE STRUGGLE OF SOME 30 YEARS LEFT
BUSTAMANTE WITH A PARTLY PARALYTIC STROKE
AND SUBSTANTIAL LOSS OF VISION IN 1964.

BUT THE WORK OF LADY BUSTAMANTE DID NOT END WHEN THE VIGOROUS LIFE OF HER HUSBAND FADED. SHE BECAME HIS EYES TO GIVE HIM SIGHT AND HIS VOICE TO GIVE HIM SPEECH, FULFILLING AT LAST THE ROLE OF THE PERFECT SUBSTITUTE, THE ALTER EGO FOR A MAN TO WHOM SHE WAS COMPLETELY LOYAL AND DEVOUTLY FAITHFUL THROUGHOUT HER LIFE.

IF EVER A WOMAN WAS INDEED CREATED FROM MAN, LADY BUSTAMANTE WAS THE MOULD FROM WHICH SUCH A SOUL MATE WAS MADE.

SHE WAS HIS LILY OF THE VALLEY, HIS BRIGHT AND MORNING STAR AND FOR ALL OF US IN THE JLP,

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SHE WAS RIGHT PERSON, IN THE RIGHT PLACE, AT
THE RIGHT TIME.

EDWARD SEAGA

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