The Errol Barrow Memorial Lecture 2007: Political Empowerment

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TONIGHT’S EVENT, on this 20th anniversary of the sad passing of one of the greatest men Barbados has ever known, National Hero and father of Independence, the Right Excellent Errol Walton Barrow, is a significant milestone of remembrance for those of us fortunate enough to have had a man of his warm humanity, character and intellect among us. And of gladness, not least, for his outstanding leadership and sacrifice.

He has left us with 20 years to reflect on all that he contributed with his creation of new standards and ideals for Barbados; two decades in which to analyse and appreciate his speeches; to consider the wisdom of his policies, and come fully to understand his influence on the development of the new Barbados we unthinkingly take for granted today, but which on deep reflection is seen to be nothing less than a shining legacy of foresight and sagacity from a political visionary under whose leadership Barbados ceased to be a colonial outpost.

For me, speaking to you on this 20th anniversary of his passing is, I assure you, not an honour I demonstrably deserve beyond the coincidence that I was 20 years his junior. As a Barbadian inspired by Mr. Barrow’s model of nation-service, I thank you most humbly for the distinct privilege your offer accords me publicly to recognize this giant of political vision for a finer Barbados for you... me...and all our countrymen and women.

I am grateful at a further level.

It has made me signally aware of my own mortality, and how little time we have in which to work for good.

As a 66-year-old citizen this year, I now realize that we lost Errol Barrow at a relatively young age!

Yet his path of progress is so distinct and permanent, his example so clear and firm, that he and his influence have become a sounding board for praise, and a springboard for the enrichment of Bajans of many political complexions, in every beneficial social or economic change we can contemplate.

We must never, never, lose sight of the value of his significant foundational role in the economic and social transformation of our little island into a sovereign entity of pride in ourselves, friends of all, and satellites of none.

No lackey thought of that. A nation-builder did!

I remember him for many things. My very first impression of him was that of a Black Rock neighbour; and a brash, almost irreverent trial lawyer who commanded the attention of all in and around the law courts. Then followed his inspiring speeches in the House of Assembly where he was feeling his way and challenging the hitherto unchallengeable Sir Grantley Adams. Then his 1961 platform appeal through speeches that resonated with people of all walks of life, earning him the leadership of the DLP at a time when no strong leader had as yet emerged.
His remarkably consistent set of ideals about Barbados and the Caribbean impressed us. They never wavered. For me, his unswerving Barbadianess and unbridled love for his people stood out, as did his mix of candour and caring.

No Barbadian of my age in the sixties can forget Mr. Barrow’s impact on our lives. He made us feel that we were somebody; and that we could realize our dreams if we were prepared to work hard. Barbados had reached a certain threshold, and in stepped Mr. Barrow and infused us with a sense that we were masters of our own fate and that through self-confidence we and our nation could move to a new, higher level.

All Barbadians are proud of the fact that a lasting bronze monument to him, in the form of a celebratory statue created by Caribbean talent, St Lucia's Ricky George, has been most appropriately placed in a revamped Independence Square. I am told it stands nine feet in height, but I think that spiritually it really is ten feet tall insofar as how Errol Walton Barrow is perceived by Barbadians like me who were historically fortunate enough to observe him first hand.

Yet even more has to be done in order for future generations of Barbadians to be able fully to grasp the liberating importance of his contribution to their very freedom!

With absolutely no prejudice to any of our other National Heroes, nor indeed to the recent comments of Dr Jean Holder and Branford Taitt about the need for a body of work to be done on our national heroes, I would like to suggest that the historians of Barbados should be challenged to document stirringly The Errol Barrow Story as a benchmark of achievement for all students of Barbadian history, politics and sociology, for all time.

It is truly regrettable that key players in our society's development, including Mr. Barrow himself, have been reluctant, if not remiss, in setting down on permanent record their experiences in sharing the chores and challenges which have guided important decision-making. Accounts of the events leading up to and involving the riots of the late thirties is dependent on notes from the Moyne Commission's hearings; the period after that when Barbados moved to self-government and Independence, has no first-person accounts save for Wynter Crawford's I Speak For The People, produced by the exemplary Professor Woodville Marshall, after laborious transcription of recordings and much research.

I am, I feel, justly proud to have played a part in getting that volume published, but regret that the efforts of Robert Morris, together with my own feeble attempts, were of no avail in getting National Hero the late Sir Frank Walcott to record his memoirs, partly because of his own procrastination, but finally by his eventual poor health.

My information is that Sir Richard Cheltenham tried in vain to get historical data from the late Prime Minister Sir Harold St John, but Sir Richard too, was thwarted by the twin problem of Sir Harold's procrastination and poor health.

With the exception of Sir Frederick Smith and possibly Sir Henry Forde, all of the leaders of the most significant period of political change in our lifetime (except Mr. Crawford) have passed on without one of them setting down their own intimate knowledge of the events leading to the creation of Barbadian history!

Barbados is the poorer for it.
I therefore appeal to the DLP (which, after all, is the organisation that courageousy championed the final high-level changes for Barbados' political emancipation) to use its potent influence to have the research and writing of The Errol Barrow Story done before it is too late to seek out living memories of his influence for good.

Errol Barrow's influence was pervasive, and this must be acknowledged in any work on his life and times.

The story of the NATION newspaper, including its name, is an example. It is the story of a group of young Barbadian journalists deciding that Independence meant we had to create our own standards for journalism in the new Barbados. Not to be controlled by Lord Thomson of Fleet, nor for the pre-eminent radio station to be ruled by Rediffusion of Regent Street.

We, like other professionals, saw Independence as proof that we had to control the essential decision-influencing elements of the society - in our case, the media.

Mr. Barrow understood the significance of this move, and acknowledged it in private to me; but he and I also understood that of necessity, we had to travel different roads that were not parallel in purpose. So we crossed swords from time to time, but never once did I feel threatened by his bravado, and I know that he welcomed what he called "intelligent challenges" from the press, even though he may have protested otherwise.

Mr. Barrow never once hid his abhorrence of some features of the popular press, and on one occasion said: "Those of you who have worked closely with me will know that I do not allow myself to be provoked into conducting debates on public or private issues in the columns of the press.

On another occasion he noted: "My political and legal reputations, unlike some of my opponents, have never depended on the fabrications of the media, but rather on my direct performances in real terms. If the media do not make you, they cannot break you.

Tonight I am sharing my thoughts on political re-empowerment of the Barrow legacy through the DLP, which, I must remind you, if indeed you need reminding, does not have a monopoly on executing Errol Barrow's concepts.

In his usual simple manner, on the eve of leading his historic 1986 electoral victory, Mr. Barrow sought to lay out for the DLP the essentials of empowerment. I am reminded of his injunction that electoral success for the DLP would come because of "The political will and ability of the DLP to pursue the right remedies.

He qualified this by emphasising his view that social justice and economic development were joined in one as twin goals.

He declared that "the right remedies" are defined as the original hallmarks of the party, and that as such its re-empowerment starts from its own conviction to be true to itself. I think Mr. Barrow was also saying that the party's emphasis - its will and its ability - must, as it did in 1961, tilt against an unequal share of power.

The selection of the topic for this Errol Barrow lecture is therefore not by accident.
It specifically relates to the sponsors of this event, to the year 2007, and to the fundamentals which brought the party into being.

Many of you are of the view that if this year escapes this organization without its procurement of governing power from the people of Barbados, nothing short of a complete renaissance will be needed if the DLP is ever to resume the role its founders sought for it to play in the public affairs and the democracy of Barbados.

In sensing this fact you are correct, and this point is graphically illustrated by your electoral performances. Before 1986, which could be regarded as your high point, you controlled up to 53 per cent of the total popular vote, however since 1991 you have dropped to 41 per cent of the total popular vote, on average.

On that basis I start by believing that the issue at the centre of this lecture is the relevance of the DLP in 2007. I hope that some of you will feel the same way by the time we leave here.

Empowerment is often seen in the context of individuals, but communities and institutions also fall within the ambit of those who need to be provided with access to power in order to fully realize their potential.

Empowerment is not just about individual action; it is also about the strength of unity. The alliance of choice and voice is just as relevant when it comes to empowering organizations.

Empowerment and access to office is key to the renewal of the DLP as a political force. Without it the party runs a serious risk of being marginalised as a mere pressure group which would be a travesty, a disservice both to its founders and to its impressive record in government.

The responsibility of leadership on this generation is therefore heavy indeed.

Heaviest of all will be the imperative to obtain office from the people of Barbados without Mr. Barrow

I feel compelled to remind you that as far back as 1958 in an analysis of politics in Barbados C. L. R. James warned "Barrow held the opposition together and without him it would probably fall apart."

Your challenge is to create the conditions where people choose to empower you with office now that Errol Barrow is not alive. Power is conferred as a consequence of the people's perception of your appropriate and demonstrated conduct over a period of time. The searching eyes of Barbados are on you.

On the way to creating the conditions for acceptance, empowerment and office, a political party has to provide people with a sense of their own liberation from their real or perceived shackles, and offer a way out from their feeling of futility as Mr. Barrow so clinically did.

This requires a political party to attract the interest and secure the confidence of a clear majority.

The people of Barbados, by their consistent record, have demonstrated a thorough way of executing the selection process.
They set very high standards for those who would run their governmental affairs. There are no short-cuts to obtaining endorsement.

On the road to seeking their approval, a political party must understand that a perceptive people will see past the smoke and mirrors, through the gloss, and around the facade.

The assumption of political office is therefore consequential on a party transparently doing most of the right things in a timely manner.

You may or may not agree with their pertinence, but I think it necessary to outline some of the things that I regard as essential.

I list five factors:

1. A strong organization.
2. Undisputed leadership.
3. Principled values.
4. A relevant vision
5. A positive spirit.

ORGANISATION

Building a reliable organization whose strength is not dependent on whether or not the party is in power is the first essential.

The notion that a political party is a machine to win elections is a temporal approach and devalues the benefit of creating an institution which is capable of surviving bad times to leave a positive and indelible mark on the country and its people.

Separation of duties is important in seeking organisational strengthening and creating a forum for ongoing creative planning and policy determination.

At the moment the political leader co-opts virtually the entire executive and a large part of the general council of the party, but these bodies need to be popularly elected and operate independently, while giving the leader space to conduct his business and lead the party politically without the fear of subterfuge.

The power of the party's chief executive officer is circumscribed. That office should be akin to that of a chief executive running a business - a clearly defined command with the authority to make decisions about the operation of the party on a day-to-day basis, while consistently reporting to the executive council through the political leader.
Fund-raising should be an all-year effort of a standing committee, and not a begging mission by a few people with contacts on the eve of an election.

Research should be on-going and be done by voluntary help; drawing on the resources we have at the university and community college, so that the party's reliable information storehouse is a source for MPs and candidates who can get influential data at a moment's notice.

LEADERSHIP

Because of the presidential nature of our elections, the matter of leadership is most crucial.

Settled leadership is a pre-condition for electoral approval, and to demonstrate this we need only refer to the last three general elections which were the DLP's worse, and coincidentally elections during which it can be said with some certainty that the issue of leadership was not fully settled.

Leadership style is another matter.

Mr. Barrow's style was appropriate to the days when we were emerging from colonialism and the adversarial style of leadership was appealing.

Mr. Barrow's style (and that of his contemporaries like Forbes Burnham, Michael Manley and Eric Williams), was consistent with that effectively used by the labour union movement in those days. Their parties either emerged from unions or patterned the unions' popular confrontational appeal. But in an environment where we have not only lost agricultural quotas, but agricultural labour as well, such approaches are less applicable.

Today we are seeking to develop our region on the basis of alliances, and our leaders must show this new capacity.

They must also be what management specialists term transformational - that is capable of transforming persons, party and country, and inspiring people to follow.

The lesson of Errol Barrow's tenure was not that the DLP should hang on to his coat tail indefinitely, for as a political party gets older it must rely even less on its past, but that you need to adopt an appropriate strategy for the times we are in today as he did then for his times. That would suggest today's leader should be one who has the refinement to understand the value of building alliances and has the capacity to negotiate the necessities of a globalize world.

A mature approach to transitions of political leadership is essential. Parties somehow expect that they will stumble on the right persons to lead them based on the ambitions of a few; or that leadership is bequeathed. Sophisticated succession planning is non-existent in political parties. So too are party conventions that subject the leadership to regular, popular election from the mass party and restrict the length of service.

In its formative years the DLP seemed to have copied the British Labour Party's model which was relevant at that time. But the British Labour Party has changed, and its leader is now chosen by popular vote at a conference called to select a leader.
The challenges are different today and the mass party is better informed. Indeed Mr. Barrow was responsible for bringing free education to all, yet we now ask these enlightened masses to forfeit their right to make their choice of a leader to a few party delegates. A more contemporary approach is needed.

I am not recommending the protracted and divisive process of the Americans, but it would be helpful if a structured approach to settling leadership succession is adopted by political parties.

On every occasion when it has become necessary to replace leadership, there has been the unfortunate specter of blood-letting.

Perhaps parties themselves should set down term limits for leaders in order to avoid the danger of someone despotically holding on to office long beyond his or her "use by" expiration date.

VISION

Today we confuse vision with what we hear from the leadership. The vision is unfortunately what the leader articulates from time to time and is not regularly tested against the high principles of the party.

The vision of a political party should be clear and unambiguous. It should of necessity be re-defined from time to time following strategic reviews.

The vision should inspire an optimistic view of the future based on critical decision-making which the party sees as fundamental to the principles for which it stands, and a belief that our people can achieve it.

It would be a mistake to believe that Mr. Barrow's vision for the 60s is still relevant in the 21st Century; but the sound principles for which he stood should guide the creation of fundamentals which will propel the party's vision statement into contemporary worth.

Of late the DLP has been seen as short on vision, or of having multiple visions. Part of the reason is that the party's structure does not, as I alluded to earlier, have an organ which focuses independently on creative new strategies.

SPIRIT

Spirit, as applied here, is that intangible sense of accomplishing which excites people about wanting to be part of a movement.

Many dismiss spirit as unimportant, but it is what ignites emotions when logic and argument fail. It binds people in a common bond when adversity sets in, and failure is at the doorstep.

A party's spirit is not its values and not its vision, but it emanates from both. It is that sense of wanting to belong which is developed in people.

Key contributions are the body language of its principals, and a contagious camaraderie that lends to a feeling oneness with a common cause.
The way in which people of all economic and social classes and colours scrambled to be part of the new DLP in the early sixties spoke to its spirit. People put aside their ideologies and differences to get on board the train. They wanted to make the journey.

A spirit is best conveyed in language which resonates with people. Political points are expressed in a way that is easily understood, accepted and repeated.

Spirit leads to a feeling of passion about the party and infuses the electorate with a desire to realize the party's dreams because they see themselves in that dream.

The essential element of spirit is based on a party being identifiable with something. The party must define what that something is, and it must be believable.

VALUES

I have deliberately left this for last, since I want to elaborate on it.

I define values as the important and precious foundation to which there is unswerving loyalty in a political organization.

I list five:

1. Balance
2. Discipline
3. Independence
4. Openness
5. Persistence

BALANCE

BALANCE is the central point between extremes.

This is not a reference to ideology. Attempting to balance ideologies can be fatal.

I refer rather to a harmonious arrangement of all the forces and factors which impinge on a party's operations, and thus its success or failure.... the balance of intra-party power, reconciling imbalances, noting that the central point is always moving, always shifting, but has to be held in focus.

A party's priorities and operations can be tilted in one way or another depending on the distribution of its strengths. We know the dangers of one group having an undeserved advantage in the affairs of a party. It becomes lop-sided.

The building blocks of success come from a perfect balance between its arms - parliamentary, executive, research and development, youth or women, with each group understanding its power and its limitation.
Other factors to be observed are the balance between work and play, and understanding that the social affairs of a party should narrow, not aggravate differences.

**DISCIPLINE**

Solomon in his wisdom (Chapter 6 verse 17) said: "For the very true beginning of wisdom is the desire of discipline; and the care of discipline is love."

A party which fails to acknowledge the importance of disciplined conduct may invite the opposite: Indiscipline and hatred - which have their own dire consequences.

Discipline is not austere and exacting punishment, but speaks to reasonableness and self-control. The highest impact of self-discipline in groups is frankness, understanding and trust.

A party's strength is undermined when it does not insist on self-examination and self-discipline with the best example coming from the top.

Discipline speaks to the mastering of emotions, judging all things said and done by what they eventually cost the party.

**INDEPENDENCE**

A party must be driven by its own beliefs - not by others' priorities.

The things which you do should not require the affirmation or permission of others.

There is often the temptation in a two-party system to make comparisons and to assess yourself through relativity, but it is essential for political units to set their own standards.

Independence should however not be carried so far that there is no interest in other opinions. There is always the need to feed off others' views in understanding what you do not stand for, and firmly formulating your own beliefs.

**OPENNESS**

Firmness of mind is, to a point, a good thing. It keeps you from becoming wishy-washy, swayed by every new bit of information that might come along.

Carried beyond a certain point, however, the mind becomes closed to any new information from any source. The closed mind is, obviously, not open to learning.

Learning is the assimilation and integration of new ideas, concepts and behaviours without which a party becomes moribund.

A party seeking to emerge from the shadows must have openness of mind.
Parties should not become married to methods, old or new. Circumstances change and demand different reactions. You have to move beyond the way things were in order accurately to evaluate the way things now are. Openness affords such vital vistas.

This is perhaps an appropriate juncture to stress the little spoken of, but the essential role of spin machinery in earning political mileage points.

Spin takes nothing for granted in the battle for the minds of voters and uses every opportunity to authoritatively put the right interpretation to eventualities. I am not here referring to calls made on the radio talk shows. I am talking about authoritative commentary from respected persons.

PERSEVERANCE

This is the ability to confront failure without giving up.

With one exception - death - no lasting change in fortune comes quickly.

A party in the political wilderness for a long period becomes anxious and has a natural fear of the future. That can stifle the perseverance and daring necessary to effect positive growth and success.

There is the pervasive inability to confront failure without giving up.

A spirit of refusing to quit because quitting is not an option is critical to building a party-in-waiting for empowerment and office.

You must feel the fear and do what you have to do anyway. The other side of the fear coin is discovery, excitement, empowerment and office.

That's how, in my view, all of these values of balance, discipline, independence, openness and perseverance translate into empowerment for a political party.

The lesson from all the recent elections in which power has been transferred from one party to another speaks to the effectiveness of all of the above.

Not in 1961, 1976, 1986 nor 1994 did empowerment take place without these conditions being met to a greater or lesser degree by the winning political parties. 1994 was perhaps a bit of an exception.

Our discriminating voters pay close attention to the structure, leadership, values and vision of political organizations before they decide to repose confidence in them.

Parties ignore these realities and get carried away by the adulation of their faithful bases, believing that they are the ones who win elections for them.

Elections are won by that small group of swing voters who remain outside the large body of committed voters on both sides who seldom ever switch loyalty.

The appeal therefore must be to swing voters.

For these are the people who have changed governments in the past.
The average numerical margin of victory from 1971 to 2003 is 16 110 voters out of an average number of persons voting of 119 986. This small margin includes two exceptional years - 1986 and 1999 when the oppositions comprised only three and two members respectively.

Let's look at the differentials since 1976:

1976 - 6,162 voters.
1981 - 6,038 voters.
1986 - 25,683 voters.
1991 - 9,345 voters.
1994 - 12,525 voters.
1999 - 38,327 voters.
2003 - 16,892 voters.

The average distance based on standard deviation ranges from a low of 0.04 in 1976 to a high of 0.21 in 1999.

The extent to which a party's values and policies can influence this small swing vote can effectively tilt the balance.

This should offer you real hope.

As your party anticipates what 2007 portends, that average swing vote of 16,000 people is what should be creating much excitement in you about empowerment.

But in case you have overlooked it, there is more happening in 2007 than the power game of the elections of 2007.

It is the power of cricket.

The power of Cricket World Cup!

I suspect that the DLP's excitement in 2007 is less about cricket power and more about what a general election may offer you on the road to political power, World Cup Cricket, or no World Cup Cricket.

As I conclude, pardon me if I appear to stick only to commenting about the games of 2007.

Anticipation in Barbados is not only about the historic hosting of the Final, but about the chances of the West Indies again winning the World Cup.
I want to suggest to you that the hope of victory for the West Indies cricket team is perhaps analogous to your hopes for the political scenario in Barbados.

Four years ago when the big event was last held, the West Indies team surprised a few and disappointed many of us.

So too a certain political party.

Fans remain divided over the ability of the West Indies to win. And the political party to win.

The press is speculating and waiting in the wings to point out all the flaws after the event, in case of loss in game, cricket or politics.

The talent and all-round ability of several of the players is well recognized, even by opponents.

As I said, the situation is analogous.

Among the team are one or two explosive players who on their day can blow the opponents away. These players have also been known to badly let down the side.

There are others in the team who have kept an end going on many occasions, but who do not have a record of prising out opponents. They however have remained on the team.

Analogous indeed!

Some new faces have been added to blend youth with experience.

Fans see the team as a combination with potential, but are not sure that they will come together on the day to deliver victory.

Comparable?

The side is being led by a player of both talent and experience, and one who has had the opportunity to lead before, but who walked away and has recently returned to great acclaim.

Analogous?

The arch-rival has been beating up on everyone recently. The team has beaten them on occasion, but not in recent encounters when it has been crucial.

The opponents are coming off a winning streak and feel that this is their opportunity to write themselves into the history books by scoring a record number of successive victories.

Will the West Indies have the balance, the self-belief, the discipline and the perseverance to turn the tables?

Similarly, will the Democratic Labour Party?

Let me suggest that success will require the E-factor.
E as in Errol. E as in empowerment.