

DAVID THOMPSON – THE FINAL CHAPTER.

Eulogy Delivered by Hartley Henry – Personal Friend and Principal Political Advisor

David John Howard Thompson

December 25th, 1961 to October 23rd, 2010

On this solemn morning, we meet to memorialize the short but illustrious life of a man who became our beacon in every storm; a friend when a helping hand was needed; a sure head in the midst of uncertainty.

I am grateful to Mara, widow of our beloved, now lamented Prime Minister, for inviting me to give this funeral oration. I feel both the hand of history and the humbling honour associated with closing the final chapter of David Thompson's short but impressive life.

He was cut down before he could accomplish the agenda he had set himself in government. In that sense, his full promise was unfulfilled.

But oh, how much he had done in so short a space of time; how many lives he had touched for the better; how greatly loved and admired he was; as much by the boys on the block as the captains of industry.

He was known by those of us close to him as "The Chief", not because he demanded it, but because he inspired it. He would have been just as content to be called simply "David", as the majority of people of Barbados did; not with disrespect but with affection.

The fondest memories of this eminent son of Barbados have been etched in the hearts of tens of thousands of us, because he was a leader who raised the level of our ambition and gave us confidence that our aspirations, both as individuals and as a nation, could be achieved, in triumph.

David Thompson knew the loneliness of a Prime Minister, on whose shoulders alone lay the burden of making final decisions that would affect the nation. It was a burden that he carried with quiet dignity, even as he contemplated deeply, on the consequences of his decisions. But he was strengthened in the isolation of his position by one overriding factor - every decision he made had ultimately to serve the people of Barbados - all of them! There could be no more noble, or more worthy a basis for a Prime Minister to make decisions!

He bore all things with equanimity. And so at the start of his illness, I recall him inviting me to his study on three separate occasions in two days; clearly wishing to say something, but not knowing how. It was only after he made the personal decision that the people of Barbados should be prepared for the worst that he said to me: "Hartley, I do not want you getting all bent out of shape, but the doctor's report is not good."

His preoccupation thereafter was with how we could share this deeply tragic information without causing alarm and affecting the smooth governance of Barbados and the conduct of its business.

He insisted he wanted to explore any and all avenues of possible recovery, while preparing the nation, gradually, for the worst. In the

end, his judgment proved to be wise.

For even though the news of his death, when it came, was numbing and hurtful, even among those who expected it, he had put in place all the arrangements for the smooth conduct of government and of the nation's business.

The Chief was a homegrown Prime Minister. Although his navel string was buried in England, this compatriot was nurtured in our uniquely Bajan manner.

Tutored exclusively in the Caribbean, he brought an Antilles focus, a regional perspective to all his endeavours.

Mentored by the late Right Excellent Errol Barrow, David Thompson subscribed to the view that our nation could be friend to all without being a satellite of any.

His Bajan anecdotes resonated with ordinary folk; his unpretentious lifestyle impressed even casual observers; his ideas created great admirers, accumulating loyalty during his 23 years as a Member of Parliament.

No wonder we saw such an outpouring of grief everywhere on that sad morning of Saturday, October 23.

This transformative leader was the essence of Bajan symbolism. David Thompson's life story is the finest example that youthfulness need not be a barrier to accomplishment. His success is a potent

symbol to every young person within our Barbadian shores and beyond, that any of them, from whatever circumstances, who is prepared to work hard and focus, can impact national governance and serve their country with distinction. He has been and always will be an excellent role model for our youth.

His public service started as a teenager, who one evening removed evidence of his school identity, so that he could go to the headquarters of the Democratic Labour Party, as an individual - not as a pupil of Combermere.

But these two identities never faded in his heart, and were intertwined in all that he did in his efforts to advance Barbados. He was a Combermerian and a Dem.

All of us love and cherish our alma mater, but I am yet to meet a more sentimental alumnus than David Thompson. Combermere School influenced almost every facet of his life. Persons who knew him well discovered that the secret to uplifting and cheering him in moments of anxiety and depression was to relive nostalgic moments of his school life at Combermere.

In my capacity as Principal Political Advisor, I had my fair share of Combermere bombardment.

For example, in discussing the composition of boards of management of several statutory corporations and other para statal agencies, he and I would meet late into the night so we could settle a list of persons

for recommendation to Cabinet. Next morning, I would receive an email with respect to the said board, but a name would be changed. On several occasions I would ask "why?", and with his legendary half-smile and chuckle, he would say **"you don't worry about that...I can vouch for the person."** After careful examination of these unexplained, phantom substitutions, I realized that in 99 per cent of the cases, a Combermerian was inserted. So thereafter, to avoid this clash, whenever a recommendation was sought, I would write in bold at the bottom of the list "a Cawmerian". Let's just say that on that score PM Thompson and I lived happily ever after.

Nothing depressed, while at the same time passionately motivated David Thompson more than an international study done a few years ago which touted his rural constituency of St. John, as not necessarily the most affluent in Barbados.

While in Opposition, all The Chief would say to me is "my day will come." On becoming Prime Minister, The Chief would make a point after his every tour of projects underway in St. John, to call and declare at the top of his voice **"tell them to do their study now! Tell them to go up to Pool Land; tell them to go down Bath; let them tour Gall Hill Pavilion. Wait 'til they see what we are going to do at Venture, College Savannah and Martins Bay"**.

David Thompson was emotional about the development of St. John and took the welfare of its inhabitants very seriously...some may even say – personally. He was determined that under his watch, St. John's time had come!

So what is the legacy of he whom we mourn and honour this morning?

He will not be recalled for erecting monuments or for being the longest serving this or that. He was not afforded the time for either. In any event, it was not within his character to acclaim David Thompson; it was more in his character to glorify Barbados.

His mantra is summed up in one of his memorable statements: ***"I hope my legacy will be how I was able to bring the parts together in such a way as to create a safe, harmonious, inspirational, economically-sound, fair, just, democratic and compassionate nation."***

For his efforts and accomplishments in this regard, he receives - Full marks!

His view that **Barbados is more than an economy - it is a society**, dictated his DLP government's priorities – empowerment of ordinary people.

The Chief believed that by building relationships in communities and giving them the authority to look after each other through constituency councils, we could create a more aware people, a more caring, more effective society.

This was reinforced through the emphasis he paid to families and family life.

It was he who introduced the concept of Families First... and it was he who placed in a Cabinet of Barbados, for the first time, a Minister of

Family.

And our Prime Minister **lived** family! His own conduct as son, husband and father was exemplary. He was known as a provider and he offered to his daughters - an arm on which to lean, an ear with which to listen, and a voice with which to reason.

In a society where male symbols are missing from the household, he was determined to promote the value of the father and the husband; hoping that as an object of imitation, others would follow. He was often seen with his own children in public and took every opportunity to encourage young people to get involved in - among other wholesome things - music, sport and scholarship. Therefore by both precept and example, The Chief paved the way for Barbados to be a kinder, gentler place to live, work and enjoy.

When our school children came under threat of the minibus culture, it was he who said they must be protected even if it meant that they should travel free of cost on public transport.

In his Budget speech after the 2008 election, he immediately adjusted the rate of national assistance payable to the more than 3,000 children dependent on the state.

It was he who said that the long summer holidays could put our children at risk, with far too much spare time; and that while privileged children could afford to pay for summer camps, all children needed to be given an opportunity to access the skills training and sports activities which these camps offered.

It was he who would spontaneously drop in on institutions which cared for the marginalized of society – be it the physically challenged, the addicted or the aged.

He wasted no time, after election, in reviewing grants made to the disabled; increasing them both for the minimum disabled as well as the severely disabled.

He made certain that the social safety net was sufficiently strong and flexible to ensure that our people, especially the most vulnerable among us, did not slide back into poverty.

He introduced the concept of philanthropy capital, announcing the formation of the Foundation for Corporate Social Responsibility and Philanthropy, providing a regime for members of the Diaspora and wealthy friends of Barbados to invest in a tangible way in the enhancement of communities, the development of named charities and improvement of health facilities.

It was he who would appear unannounced at football, cricket or basketball encounters as far as Checker Hall, St Lucy, St. Christopher, Christ Church or Bayfield, St Philip, but particularly in his beloved St John, showing personal interest in the pursuits of the young by enquiring after their welfare.

He was the number one fan of St John Sonnets, paying close attention to the growth of individual players, and looking after their families.

His first ministerial portfolio in the nineties was Culture and he seemed never to have abandoned it. He recognized the potential for the cultural industries to be money-spinners for Barbados and sought to foster them. He was one never to miss calypso tents; and judged lyrics; not for their support or opposition to his government, but by the use of language and double entendre.

An issue very near and dear to the heart of David Thompson, but which he did not live to realize, was that of full integration of the Diaspora into everyday Barbadian society. He was highly disappointed that ill health prevented him from attending and outlining his vision to the Inaugural Barbados Diaspora Network Conference in August this year.

The Chief anticipated creating a Barbadian experience in which resident and non-resident Barbadians would truly embrace each other and value their respective contributions to the growth and success of this country.

Our late Prime Minister sought to be a unifying force, and promoted the need for all Barbadians to see themselves as Barbadians first, whether they lived here or not; whether they were Dems or not.

Proof of his commitment to reaching across the political divide was his willingness to nominate the Leader of Opposition Business in the Senate for a top post at the United Nations, and to throw the full

weight of Government support behind the campaign to have her elected.

Also, his invitation to his principal political adversary, a former Prime Minister and still sitting Opposition Parliamentarian, to serve on a panel of Eminent Persons, to advise him, personally, on the options confronting him in the throes of the worst economic recession known to modern man.

David Thompson saw value in using all the resources available to his government to propel the country and its citizens. Indeed, last year he argued: ***"This is the time to put Barbados first. Our position is that any and all ideas advanced for grappling with and surmounting current challenges will be embraced and pursued, no matter the source."***

But David Thompson was also a politician in the way we define politicians. His platform oratory was a drawing card at DLP mass meetings. He was aware that invective was part of political armory...

Yet he would use private moments to temper criticisms and attacks on opponents; always mindful of the impact of words on the relatives and friends of those he criticized. In response to my recommended onslaught on a person, PM Thompson would say "There is no need to destroy individuals...remember, they have families too. Let us just clip a wing or two".

David Thompson was also a Caribbean man. A Caribbean leader! He

had many friends in both governing and opposition parties throughout the region. He made many of these friends during the 14 year stint he spent in opposition.

As part of his preparation for the office of Prime Minister, The Chief, though already a parliamentarian, with eight years ministerial experience – including that of Minister of Finance – adopted the posture of a student of politics. On his own recognizance, he journeyed across the Caribbean, observing election campaigns and other political developments. Whether it was Sandy Point in St. Kitts, Over the Dry River in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, East End in Grand Cayman, Anse La Raye in St. Lucia, Road Town in Tortola or New Providence Island in the Bahamas, David Thompson could be seen on the campaign trail in all these islands, clad in jeans and tee shirt, and taking copious notes of the right and wrong of election campaign strategy.

On such outings, he would make appointments with both government and opposition parliamentarians and assure them of his party's readiness to assume the reins of office and its unwavering commitment to the cause of regionalism.

Little wonder therefore that on the morning of January 16th , 2008 David Thompson was able to hit the road running, as it were, being on a first-name basis with every sitting Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition in the Caribbean, and also being up to date on issues of interest and concern to the Standing Committee of Heads.

Little wonder, too, that so many political leaders from all sides of the political fence in their own countries are gathered here this morning,

as one collective, to honour a fallen brother.

David Thompson had very clear ideas about the value of the Caribbean Single Market to the people of the region; he was also convinced of the importance of inter-regional transportation, which is why he kept Barbados involved in LIAT even as others who needed it more were abandoning it. He never regarded smallness as a barrier to intellectual debate, but he recognized that in dealing with the wider international community, the Caribbean served itself best by pulling together its greatest talents in its service – and that was as true for West Indian Cricket and the University of the West Indies as it was for bargaining on matters of trade with bigger countries.

I recall his decision to fly into Guyana to calm the then raging Guyana-Barbados immigration debate. He said to me: **“We can’t let emotional outbursts and misunderstandings destroy 100 years of unparalleled friendship and cooperation”**.

On another occasion he opined, that in dealing with differences of opinion among regional leaders, he would not be found guilty of shouting across the waters of the Caribbean Sea to a colleague.

I recall his insisting that the Trinidad-Barbados fishing accord could ideally be handled, through the strengthening of friendships rather than the signing of treaties!

As a product himself of the University of the West Indies, on whose campus, he made many West Indian friends and exchanged ideas, dreams and visions, Mr. Thompson was deeply committed to the preservation of the University and its continuing capacity to produce

alumni, who would help the Caribbean to compete successfully with the best in the world.

It was this insightfulness and a clear vision of needed enhancements to regional integration that garnered for David Thompson, in two and a half short years, immense admiration and respect from colleague Prime Ministers and Heads of Government in CARICOM, Central, Latin and North America, Europe and Asia. Whether it was the issue of regional air transportation, coordination of meaningful relief to the people of Haiti or US-Caribbean relations, the views of David Thompson as Prime Minister of Barbados were eagerly sought and became germane to the quest for solutions. I well recall earlier this year, when Chairman of Virgin Atlantic, Sir Richard Branson, cancelled meetings in Asia and flew back to London to meet with Thompson; saying, in his correspondence "it is an opportunity not to be missed".

We, in Barbados, like many other countries in the world, are experiencing difficult times, due in part to the global financial fall-out which impacted our major trading partners, beginning in late 2007.

It is a measure of David Thompson's transparent approach to governance and the extent to which he provided a listening ear at home and abroad, that he enjoyed the confidence of business leaders in Barbados.

They rallied to his call not to resort to layoffs as their first course of action. Saving jobs, he coaxed, should be part of national commitment. The effect has been that unemployment levels have risen in Barbados only marginally, compared to other countries.

He enjoyed, in the tradition of leaders of the DLP, an exemplary relationship with trade unions. Indeed, both the business sector and the trade union movement credit him for his role in establishing the first Social Partnership when he was a fledgling Minister of Finance in the very difficult early nineties.

Over the last few days, as all sections of our nation poured out their heartfelt sentiments about David Thompson, it became abundantly clear that they knew that his principal characteristic is that he was a humanitarian.

His time and interest were extended to both the great and small of our society. He lost no opportunity to attend the humblest of functions if he thought his presence would serve as encouragement to others.

Indeed, this public accessibility, which David Thompson afforded, helped him considerably in coming to grips with the everyday needs of all. In his just over 1,000 days in office he attended more private functions and events than any predecessor did in a full five year term. It was as if he knew he had a short time...and lots of people to meet, inspire, and motivate.

David Thompson worked at a frenetic pace! Had his journey not been cut short, he would undoubtedly have inspired more...motivated more...and promoted more to join in the fashioning of a new Barbados – one in which there is one society, one people, one nation, all looking out for the other.

It is for these reasons that Barbadians became possessive of David Thompson. In tributes paid to him these past 11 days, he was not referred to as **the** Prime Minister; not even as **our** Prime Minister. We all said: he was "**my** Prime Minister." Barbadians proudly owned him.

David Thompson knew where he wanted to take Barbados: A dream unfilled, a vision postponed. All he really wanted was a little more time.

But what he did not get in tenure, he got in affection. Thus he became a leader who was FIRST in the hearts of the citizens of Barbados. David Thompson: – Adulated by the youth, acknowledged by the aged, affirmed by Combermerians, acclaimed by Dems, adored by St. John, admired by all.

The Chief once said he would give Barbados all that he had until the day he died. And, he did!

Throughout his seven-month encounter with this unremitting tumor, The Chief was continuously worried about the effect of the news on his countrymen; he seemed to care less about his own challenge. He never worried about losing the battle...his preoccupation was with fighting the disease.

His periods abroad became more and more restless, not as a result of inadequate health care and attention – for, thanks to Dr. Richard Ishmael, he got the very best, - but because he was away from his family, his friends and his files; unable to impart knowledge and

guidance to some of his fledgling Ministers.

His vigil during the long nights of ill health comported with the whole tenor of his life – although in extreme pain, not a sigh, not a groan escaped him.

Indeed, he drew his strength from talking about and promoting Barbados; at a time when it was clear to all that his grip on life, was weakening.

Here's what Dr. Ira Jacobson, the Gastroenterologist at New York Presbyterian Hospital, wrote in a letter to Dr. Ishmael, after learning of the death of Mr. Thompson:

“Richard, I did not know much about his politics, but it was readily apparent to me that he was a good man, a wonderful husband and father, and a great leader who loved his people and they loved him back.

We need more leaders like him on the international stage and his tragic passing is a loss for the world”.

In the end, with a smile of undisturbed serenity, David Thompson closed his short, but well spent life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the divinity which shapes our ends has determined that our late Prime Minister's labours would be no more; and for us this appears to be a moment of unbearable loss and uncertainty.

Yet the Chief would not have us despair. As heirs of the great heritage of Barbados he would want us all to toil towards that bright future he knew we could create for ourselves.

In his last letter sent to the constituents of St John he reminded them that "I am yours and you are mine". No wonder that on this day all of us are holding on to piece of him.

When we repair to the yard of St John's Parish Church, we will inter his body. With his burial a bit of every Barbadian will be committed to that cemetery yard. He will take 270,000 bits of us with him. Not 50,000 bits of us; not just 100,000 pieces; even more than 200,000: 270,000 pieces of us will be buried with David John Howard...later today.

But his soul, his vision, and the admiration we all feel for him will not be interred. These will live on and flourish amongst us all.

The greatest tribute that every one of us can pay to his memory is to pursue and realize that vision of a Better Barbados for ALL!

Therefore, be comforted, my fellow citizens and friends. For to know sorrow is to acknowledge love.

To seek the face of God, is to recognize our limitations.

To carry on with hearts full of memories is to be wholly human.

To heal, day-by-day, as we must, is to build a bridge of love that will reach far beyond time, into forever!

May our dear, late Prime Minister find all the comfort we collectively wish for him, and may his soul enjoy the peace he deserves...beyond the river!

Goodbye, my friend, Goodbye!!

END