Annual Tom Adams Memorial Lecture 2016

Intellect, Vision, and Fortitude in an Island State: The Tom Adams Story

Lecture delivered by Senator Dr. Jerome Walcott, General Secretary of the Barbados Labour Party on Thursday, September 22, 2016 at the Errol Barrow Centre for Creative Imagination, UWI Cave Hill Campus, St. Michael, Barbados at 7:30 pm

In my opinion, Tom Adams was one of the greatest Barbadians who ever lived and is the most visionary leader we have ever had. I say this because:

- He conceptualized the construction of the ABC Highway – the major thoroughfare in Barbados today.

- He initiated the development of the International Business sector – the number two foreign exchange earning sector in Barbados for the last several years.

- He was the architect behind the Plantation Tenancies Freehold Purchase Act that has enabled thousands of Barbadians to purchase land and build their own homes.

- He was responsible for the establishment of the National Drug Service which ensured that Barbadians of all ages could get medication free or at minimal cost.

- He was the driving force behind the establishment and promotion of the Credit Union movement which has helped thousands of Barbadians to own homes, land, vehicles and to start businesses.

- He was the catalyst for women’s upward mobility in society and the removal of the concept of illegitimacy which gave legal rights of inheritance to thousands of children born out of wedlock.

- And he pushed for the establishment of the NCF which is at the centre of Barbados’ cultural and artistic renaissance.

The Hon. Mia Mottley, Leader of the Opposition, former Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur, current and former Parliamentarians, members of the Diplomatic Corps, distinguished ladies and gentleman, Good evening.

I stand before you this evening with the temerity to deliver the lecture; “Intellect, Vision, and Fortitude in an Island State: The Tom Adams Story”. Tonight, I will share with you my perspective of the impact which John Michael Geoffrey Manningham “Tom” Adams had on the development of Barbados and the development of its people.
Although his widow Genevieve and his sons are overseas, she has given me her blessings for this evening’s presentation.

As I do this, I am particularly grateful to the Hon. Cynthia Forde, the current MP for St. Thomas, and her team, for entrusting me with such an important task. Cynthie, as she likes to be called, served as Tom’s branch president and in diverse other roles for many years in St. Thomas; and her stellar representation of that parish is testimony to Tom’s insight in supporting her from an early age.

It is entirely due to the devotion and diligence of Cynthie and those who comprise the Tom Adams Memorial Committee that most people recall the name of Tom Adams at all.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a blight on our politics and democracy – and the greatest absurdity in our history – that the work and worth of Tom Adams have been lost to the murky machinations of political forces.

Let us not make any bones about it. There is enough blame to go around. The BLP cannot be absolved from this. It is the most singular discredit to our matchless legacy that we have allowed this dismissal of such a superior intellect, and non-attribution of his accomplishments to take root.

There must be a reversal of this travesty.

Tom Adams must be accorded his rightful and magnificent place in our history!

If at the end of my presentation, I am able to stimulate interest among a generation for whom the legacy of Tom has been lost but, more importantly, cause any of our current crop of aspiring politicians, to be so inspired by the life of Tom Adams; to want to follow in his footsteps, I consider I would have achieved my goal.

Some of you are probably thinking, why is Jerome Walcott presenting this lecture?

After all, I was not one of Tom Adams’ contemporaries; and unlike those who have previously presented in this series of memorial lectures, including his son Rawdon, I never worked with him and I cannot speak of any serious interaction with him. However, thanks to my friend George Griffith, as a medical student, I got a chance to meet him on two occasions.

Worry no more; let me allow you to exhale.

The answer is simple.

It is about inspiration.

I have been inspired by Tom Adams the man, his style and his still unfathomable public service to his beloved Barbados. His ability to stimulate and motivate; the insightfulness and comprehensive balanced approach he brought to leadership; the visionary and...
futuristic concepts of his ideas; the clarity of thoughts and application to purpose; his clearly detailed preparation and, of course, sheer intellect.

Indeed, he meshed all of these characteristics to take Barbados on such an unimaginable journey in eight and a half years as Prime Minister, so that the stature and transformation of Barbados that he engineered remains the standard by which we are measured, and the engine on which Barbados still runs 30 years later, despite the war unleashed, especially in recent times, on this unshakable foundation.

I am not given to hero worship and my training as a surgeon has only exposed too often the frailties of man; neither would I wish to trespass on what is reserved for our God.

But if I had a hero, and I have said it before, that person would be Tom Adams. I consider myself fortunate to have been growing up while Tom Adams was on stage. My generation grew up in a time when political dynamism was at its peak, with probably the most formidable collection of politicians ever – with Adams and Barrow … all pretty much in their prime. Amongst this exceptional group, Tom Adams was most exceptional. The magnetism of his intellect was palpable. For us, then teenaged boys, and for much of Barbados too, a disproportionate amount of interest in politics in the 70s was the result of Tom Adams’ sheer fluidity with language, the likes of which Barbados had not seen before – and has not seen since.

Tuesdays were not for getting up to mischief at the Lodge School. It was about not missing the school bus, jumping off as soon as it approached the traffic lights in St Michael’s Row and running to the public gallery of Parliament …… to listen to Tom; then running home. Well, you know, I still had to get home by a certain time!

I vividly recall standing in the pouring rain in Eagle Hall on the eve of the 1976 elections unable to vote but just to hear Tom. It was mesmerizing, it was dramatic. The Monday that he died, I was a young surgical resident in the operating theatre. After we received the news of his passing, I was unable to continue any surgery. Such was the effect Tom Adams had on me. Nothing was as exciting as Tom in the House of Assembly. His interventions were textbook studies in content, phrasing, and emphasis, economy of words, the motivational, and the cruel put down. You listened to Tom to learn. He inspired us youngsters to go for excellence, to debate among ourselves, to be curious and to be achievers.

He was terrific at encapsulating any debate, and setting that description in your mind and that of the public. Note his first statement in the heralded reply to the 1976 Budget:

“Mr. Speaker, seldom has a budget and the reply been attended in this House of Assembly by so much confusion.”

Or the build-up and put down:

“I have seen some tinkering with the cigarette tax. I congratulate him (the Prime Minister Errol Barrow) for saving the small shopkeepers in the country from having to put 5 cents
or 6 cents in the tin whenever they sell a package of cigarettes. A little more foresight would have avoided this in the first place.”

Or his description of the DLP as a Government that “came into power on a flood of euphoria and a complete absence of promise.”

Is this a case of deja-vu?

By the way, if anyone wants a lesson in debate demolition, Tom Adams’ 1976 Budget reply is required reading; a reply that he was asked to give immediately after the Budget had been presented by The Rt Excellent Errol Barrow.

His cleverness in debate has been spoken about repeatedly. Known for his respect for parliamentary rules and decorum, one admired trait was his knack for adhering to the Rules while breaking them.

Once asked to withdraw any reference to “wickedness” in the statement, “Can you believe that honourable members can be so wicked as to come into the House and try to make the public and the House believe people are being fired?”, Tom replied:

“I beg your pardon, Sir. The honourable Member for St. Lucy is not wicked, he is not vicious and he is not a liar and I withdraw all of those words that I have used or implied, Sir.”

In an aspirational society, who could not be inspired by Tom’s educational and professional achievements? He was a Barbados scholar in Mathematics, studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford, then went on to study law at Gray’s Inn.

There was also the expanse of his knowledge on areas unrelated to his studies or profession, and his apparent mastery of all kinds of eclectic subjects.

He was an expert philatelist; expert on war history (both ancient and modern); expert on the classics; expert on philosophy; expert on cards; expert on gardening. There is a story about a Minister passionately outlining a proposal while Tom, chairing the session, sat at the head of the table reading a Time magazine, seemingly oblivious to the points being made.

After a while, the exasperated Minister interrupted himself and upbraided Tom for such a discourtesy. To the Minister’s chagrin, Tom apologized and repeated the speech of the Minister, ending by asking him if he wanted to know what was in the Time magazine – and telling him, too.

But the first lesson of the Tom Adams model is not intellect in itself, but its application to inspire and impact the society for the greater good.

What comes to mind is this extract from Machiavelli in “The Prince”: 
“……there are three classes of intellects: one which comprehends by itself; another which appreciates what others comprehend; and a third which neither comprehends by itself nor by the showing of others; the first is the most excellent, the second is good, the third is useless.”

Tom was a unique combination of the first two while also exhibiting the notion that the greater intellect one has, the more originality one finds in men. In other words, excellence seeks out excellence and understands that progress is not the province of a few, but the inputs of many are necessary in making people become a part of their own narrative and in shaping policy. Tom was lauded for his predilection to canvass opinions and give his colleagues room to grow once they stayed within the confines of Cabinet accountability, democratic principles, and the programme of the Government.

No wonder, then, that Tom was able to lead, that which is often regarded as the best political team in Barbados’ history, and became known as “The Great Combination.” The team of Sir Henry Forde, Sir Bernard St. John, Sir Louis Tull, Dame Billie Miller, Sir Richard Cheltenham, Sir David Simmons, Lindsay Bolden and Ezra Alleyne; each of whom was brilliant in their own right.

For a man of elevated ability, he had a knack for being nice to ordinary folk; the story of the NCC worker whom he drove to Ilaro Court and his relation with “Slims” and “Gearbox”. Adams welcomed conversing, even getting advice, from very much younger people. This tendency to recognize youthful talent and to propel the growth of individuals, for the benefit of the country, is best illustrated in Adams’ positioning of a young Owen Arthur.

Arthur became Prime Minister ten years after Adams; in describing Tom Adams, Arthur said “he was the mastermind of my political campaign, but he also found the time to be a canvasser, in his very complete way, he found time to both be my general and one of my foot soldiers”. Seeing Owen Arthur elected as MP for St. Peter in 1984 was Tom’s last great political crusade. A few months later, speaking in debate on Tom’s passing, Arthur noted, “I want to believe that everything I shall do in public life will be to the glory and the credit of the investment he has made in me”. It is fair to say Arthur, in this respect, kept his word. He has so far come closest to fulfilling the promise of the Tom Adams model, and in so doing becoming the outstanding politician of his generation.

Barbados requires this application of intellect of the Tom Adams model rather than what has been our lot for the last seven or so years. Intelligence without ambition is wasted. Tom Adams maximized his intellect with a soaring ambition, ingenious in its simplicity – to make Barbados the best small island state in the world.

This was wrapped in a vision so farsighted that, in many respects, we still have not come to grips with the components of that visualization – aspects of which are still to be realized and or completed.

The vision to pole vault Barbados to a place unknown was grounded in certain fundamentals. The practice of democratic socialism, with a fully pragmatic twist. Firm
management of the economy to avoid unsustainable fiscal deficits and borrowing for non-
productive purposes. Development and investment for the common and universal good.

The great success of Tom Adams’ vision is even more astonishing when, not only the time
span is factored in, but more so the distance from where he and his Administration had to
come. By 1976, Barbados had gone through about four years of economic turmoil
stemming from the 1973 oil crisis and the encompassing recessionary period that followed.

Socially, the country entered a phase of high unemployment which ballooned upwards of
24 per cent by 1975. Economically, Barbados’ Gross Domestic Product fell drastically
between 1973 and 1976 while the debt had sky-rocketed, to more than double since 1971
to over $200 million, and the influx of foreign investment had quickly nose-dived.

With very high inflation rates hovering around 100 per cent in the four years of 1972 to
1976, and a staggering cost of living increase of 127 per cent between 1971 and 1976, the
population began to question the promise of Barbados’ post-Independence development.

Politically, the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) became dimmed in the eyes of polity by
the time the 1976 general elections came around. The public had soured on a litany of
shadowy gambits including International Seafoods Limited, Carib West Airways, the
purchase of Bath Plantation and the North Point – a boat that could not sail – all of which
Tom later described as “an equation of financial disgrace”.

The DLP also displayed high arrogance at the depths of despair in the oil crisis by rolling
out the “privileged pump”, which catered only to DLP members and cronies; and The Rt.
Excellent Errol Barrow led the denigration of members of the public in the kind of
shocking language that was unheard of, such as “crabs in a barrel”, “army of occupation”
and the suggestion that people should be put in a barrel of oil, set alight and put to sea.

Tom himself was the focus of vituperative attacks. In fact, one of the DLP’s campaign
slogans was, Can you trust Tom Adams?

Any of this sounds familiar?

Going where angels fear to tread, Adams, in the foreword of the BLP’s 1976 Manifesto,
pledged “to bring new ideas, bold initiatives and fresh thinking about our national
problems.” He was being modest.

Polish philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that “talent hits a target no one else can hit,
[and] genius hits a target no one else can see.” He probably had Tom Adams in mind. The
vision was not merely to redress the major issues of socio-economic depression and
mayhem left by the DLP. Adams’ ambition was the wholesale transplantation of
Barbadians to a new state of mind and way of life, and Barbados from a country marking
time with a colonial type model to being exceptional.

By 1985, Tom’s work was spectacularly successful.
I could end this part of the presentation now with these three statements. He had a comprehensive blueprint for the development of Barbados and Barbadians. Every component of Barbados was transformed by the vision of Tom Adams. Indeed, the revolution was so complete that today almost every aspect of life that we enjoy is due to the realization of Tom Adams’ vision. It is summed up in the BLP’s motto, “A Better Life for Our People.”

Starting with the abolishment of the then onerous 5% sales tax, Tom Adams embarked on a path not travelled in which, he said, “the answers are to be found in the formulas of better management and improving confidence.”

He fashioned an advanced approach to economic management that utilized tax breaks to spur investment and build social capacity – moving from taxes as an annual Budgetary punishment, to taxation as a tool for prosperity and what he described as “putting money in people’s pockets”.

From the man, Tom, of whom it was said, “his vast knowledge of the structure and functioning of economics was perhaps the largest knowledge available to this country, possessed by one person”, came the international financial services sector. This remains a significant pillar of the Barbados economy second only to tourism in contributing to GDP.

In fact, it was then that the novel concept of a services economy based around tourism and financial services was born. This thrust took place notwithstanding the fact that sugar production and food crop output, reached new heights.

That period was also characterized by bold forays in developmental economics, fully understanding the role Government must play to stimulate progress. This resulted, among others, in the creation of the Barbados Development Bank, the Insurance Corporation of Barbados, the Barbados National Bank, the Arawak Cement Plant, Heywoods Hotel, the Central Bank and the promotion of the credit union movement as an indigenous alternative to the banking sector.

The legacy of these institutional initiatives was wealth creating opportunities for thousands of average Barbadians which led to more of them, than ever before, owning small businesses. Perhaps more relatable is Tom’s foresight in creating the infrastructure without which transportation in Barbados would be unimaginable. The Spring Garden Highway; the ABC Highway; the Northern Access Road and plans laid for Highway 2A; Warrens as a town centre with commercial and manufacturing activities; a redeveloped Bridgetown Port and the new Grantley Adams International Airport.

An elderly resident of Jackson described Warrens, as being “cane fields and rock” before the construction of the highway. Tom thought that it was essential to have a direct link between our air and sea ports. He felt that along this highway, manufacturing and commercial activities would spring up.

He conceptualized a four-lane highway; hence, the necessary land acquisitions were made in the 80s and therefore were not required when the country finally got around to making
a section of it four lanes, thirty years later. It was estimated to cost $30 million at that time. To make it a complete four lane highway today would cost six-seven times as much.

This was vision.

Reflect on the fact, too, that 30 years ago, Tom Adams, the visionary, was not only speaking of four lane highways but of the impending computer revolution. He stated emphatically in 1985 that, in a few years, computers would replace type-writers on every desk in offices. This was remarkable for at that time the average Barbadian had only heard of this new “machine” called a computer and hardly knew anything about it.

Another visionary idea was his thoughts on alternative energy. We are now wrapped-up in discussions about a green economy and renewable energy, but thirty years ago, Tom Adams was promoting the use of solar energy and tax incentives were introduced by him to encourage persons to install solar heaters as he promoted the benefits of a solar industry in Barbados. Still Visionary!

In education, there was the new Education Act of 1981, a very much expanded school building programme with 6,000 new places for primary school children, removal of the restriction that led to 14-year-olds having their education automatically terminated, and the awarding of a special scholarship to spur an interest in foreign languages. This move recognized the importance of Barbados needing more of its people trained and equipped to take advantage of the opportunities in the offshore and tourism sectors.

Government housing programmes were massive. Developments included Wotton, Kensington Lodge, Ferniehurst, Haynesville, Oxnards and Rosemont. Together with the private sector, an average of 1,200 homes were built annually. The sites and services programme, which facilitated the Barbadian culture of purchasing land and gradually building a house, was introduced. And in another radical move, residents were relocated en masse from the poverty of Springhead to the modernity of electricity, roads and piped water of Sion Hill. Anyone here from White Hill must be apoplectic.

Mindful of time constraints, you can mull over this list at leisure: the National Petroleum Corporation, the Export Promotion Corporation, the Unemployment Benefit Scheme, the National Training Board, the National Sports Council, the new Bridgetown Fisheries Complex and the new General Post Office.

During Tom’s tenure, Parliament was truly a place for the people’s business, an engine for growth with a prodigious output of complex legislation relating to governance, social programmes, business development and new ventures. Included here were the passage of the Family Law Act, Property Act, Ombudsman Act, Companies Act, Immigration Act and Administrative Justice Act.

Ladies and gentlemen, to cover the benefits to Barbados of the spectrum of Tom’s achievements can, and should be dealt with in a series of lectures; they cannot be dealt with adequately in one lecture.
Time constraints or not, we must pause for some reverence to five seminal ones which focused on the development of people. This is important because Tom not only visualized the development of the economy, but the enfranchisement of the Barbadian society as well. Each measure shows Tom to be far more multi-dimensional than just the political and economic guru of his time, and reflects an unchanging component of his philosophy; that, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, “the care of human life and happiness is the first and only object of good government.”

The work of the Adams administration on the Status of Women, leading to the establishment of the Bureau of Women’s Affairs, was the catalyst for the women of Barbados to take their rightful place in society in every sphere alongside men.

The benefits of the removal of the concept of illegitimacy through the Status of Children Reform Act will endure as long as there is a Barbados.

The establishment of the Barbados National Drug Service fundamentally changed the lives of thousands of Barbadians, reinforcing one of the basic provisions of Government, the health of its citizens. This was revolutionary in our Region. It is one that should never be sullied. The creation of the National Cultural Foundation (NCF), recognizing the importance of cultural identity to a young post-colonial population and the need for appropriate cultural activities to be organized, supported and sustained. Hence, NIFCA and an enhanced Crop Over Festival with emphasis on developing the local calypso art form.

Coupled with this was the commissioning of the Emancipation statue, a symbol of freedom from the shackles of our history of slavery. This was aimed at instilling in Barbadians a sense of identity. Ironically, Tom was preparing a major speech for the unveiling of this statue when he passed, some six days before the planned ceremony. It is noteworthy that his foresight for such potent symbols was continued by the Arthur administration.

That is why today all of the major national statues in Barbados were commissioned and erected under the BLP. By far, the greatest of these measures championed by Tom was the Tenantries Freehold Purchase Act of 1980. This Act completed the total emancipation of the Barbadian society by empowering thousands of working class Barbadians to own property and enjoy the modern amenities that were mushrooming across the island.

Almost 8,000 individuals were the immediate beneficiaries of this legislation, the core of which was that the land occupied for generations on plantations could be acquired for ten cents – yes, ten cents – a square foot; a price governed by considerations of public policy. It also provided for tenants to acquire the land they were “working”; with the Adams administration providing services including surveying and conveyancing under the Tenantries Development Act. While 300 years after slavery, the call for reparations continues, Tom Adams institutionalized Barbados’ own reparations to its people.

It is impossible to capture the freeing from the dehumanizing aspect of the plantation system. But the social and economic transformation of the Tenantries Act is there for all to see – and in motion to this very day.
It is doubtful that in the annals of the history of Barbados whether any initiative will be as encompassing, of the scale, or as uplifting of the spirit as the social and economic revolution of the Tenancies Act. On that alone, Tom Adams is incomparable.

These days, we hear about “building a society,” yet this was exactly what he and the BLP were doing 30 years ago. But true greatness is never a result of chance occurrence or a one-time effort or achievement. It requires a multitude of correct decisions for the everyday choices between putting the country in reverse or progress.

If Barbadians came to know first-hand the depth of his great brain between 1976 and 1985, the resoluteness which Tom Adams brought to the nation in spearheading national development was nothing short of phenomenal. It was a time requiring the greatest fortitude. Leaders led and Tom Adams led from the front. He communicated consistently with the people and readily took responsibility.

There was the resolve to hold together the BLP after the devastating loss of 1971 and at the age of thirty-nine, to persevere against attempts to remove him from the leadership of the party. Of course, this is the realm of Party politics.

There was the resolve demonstrated in directing two by-elections and a general election in one year—all of which he won. There was the resolve demonstrated in disbanding the sales tax immediately on assuming office in the midst of parlous government finances. There was the resolve shown in appointing Sir Harcourt Lewis, then Treasurer of the DLP, to be the Manager of the new Barbados National Bank, in the face of criticism from some of his colleagues.

There was the resolve in standing firm, even against his Cabinet colleagues, on matters such as the construction of the ABC Highway. From all reports it was a difficult time in Cabinet. Of course, there was massive criticism from the Opposition DLP. With charges that it was unnecessary and would only serve for the landing of ganja planes.

Indeed, the Rt. Excellent Errol Barrow posited that he would never drive on it. However, his name is now attached to it. What a travesty! There was the resolve against the push back of many policies by the DLP, ably supported by sections of the media. You would not believe that the Opposition led the charge against the introduction of the Tenancies Freehold Purchase Act. However, they later still voted for it on a division.

And there was the resolve to take Barbados into an IMF stand-by arrangement programme on Barbados’ terms and successfully overcoming the economic hiccup which prompted it. All of these domestic challenges paled into insignificance to the fortitude required of the leader as a number of catastrophic occurrences, with international consequences, called for quick and decisive action.

As Sir Louis Tull said, “before the team could warm their seats in Cabinet”, a Cubana airlines crashed off the west coast of Barbados in one of the most devastating acts of terrorism involving the bombing of an airline in the Western Hemisphere up to this day.
The monument at Prospect, St. James, is in memory of that for those of you who are not familiar.

With the then Cold War still in full effect, the dynamics of power relations between the US and its allies, and Russia and theirs, of which Cuba, 90 miles off Miami was one, the crash had the potential to put Barbados in a cauldron in which it would be cooked. Tom Adams’ perspicacity allowed him to navigate this minefield such that Barbados remained an ally of the US and developed strong relations with Cuba.

There were invasion threats from the likes of Sidney Burnett-Alleyne. There was the issue of the HARP gun, another calamity of international proportions, involving South African connections in a time of apartheid and Israeli intelligence. For reference, you can google Dr. Gerry Bull and read of his fate allegedly at the hands of the Mossad.

Tom Adams handled these with the aplomb of a man who was not the Prime Minister of a small, insignificant country, but a leader in the developed world, and maybe even one of the war generals he loved to read about.

And just when one thought his “testicular fortitude” was beyond question, he was further challenged to an extreme, initially by a coup in Grenada when Maurice Bishop and his New Jewel Movement seized power in 1979, and then in 1983 when that communist government imploded with mass executions.

Against considerable odds, Tom Adams forged an alliance first with then Prime Minister of Dominica, Eugenia Charles, and then other regional colleagues to spearhead a US-led intervention of Grenada. Fortunately, Tom had the foresight to establish the Barbados Defence Force in 1979, in the face of tremendous criticism, which was then able to participate in this action.

The circumstances of Caribbean politics and lives might have been so very different without the tenacity of Tom to take a stand for democracy in the region. Tom’s resolve extended to foreign policy, in which, despite the East-West divide, by 1977 he had established diplomatic relations with countries in Communist Europe, not because it was pro-socialist but because Barbados was looking for cheaper sources of imports, for technical assistance, and hoped it could attract East European tourists.

Clearly, the new direction for Barbados’ foreign relations was tied to its economic realities. Pragmatism was the only “ism” Tom was interested in. An unrepentant regionalist, Tom also recognized the potential of a unified and prosperous Caribbean; more critically, the benefits for regional people.


He suggested that insularity characterized by increasing fractures would “run counter to our efforts at strengthening our external role and promoting our political standing, but it
could even make it more difficult for us individually to satisfy the reasonable needs and aspirations of the people we represent.”

So where does this leave us? Unmistakably, the Tom Adams model calls for fortitude – the courage to make decisions in the interest of citizens. As part of the propensity for reinvention, we have moved from “pro-active leadership” to “adaptive leadership.”

Do not be surprised if sometime soon, you do not see or hear being trumpeted the benefits of the “leadership of silence.” Luckily, we already know what those benefits are. What is leadership if it is not proactive and adaptive? Barbados will do well to look to the Tom Adams model to recapture what it is like to lead.

Tom Adams’ phenomenal accomplishments were entrenched in a short nine years. It was an enormous amount of work. The lesson for us is that geniuses also work. Indeed, there is a body of work that suggests you only become great by constantly honing your skills.

Barbados has been described as being in a state of inertia. When we look around, we see evidence of laziness and complacency. No society that chooses laziness, excuses, procrastination and complaining can survive. We must show up for work, whether it is at Parliament or dealing with files. Barbados can only move forward if, from the top to the bottom, we show up for work. And work.

We agree the uniqueness of Tom Adams will probably not be replicated anytime soon. But a large measure of that uniqueness was the fact that not only did he do great things, but he did small things in a great way.

Yes, there was the extraordinary, the remarkable, and the unusual. But Tom Adams also excelled in what is called “secondary greatness”, the issues of REAL LIFE – those things in a country that are relevant; in fact, necessary, for the common and universal good and day to day living.

Can you imagine a Tom Adams administration glibly presiding over the severest water problems for almost two years? The least we can expect from our leaders is to deal with the “issues of real life”, provide at the very least the five basic components for which Government exists – to provide shelter, health care, education, sanitation and transport.

Tom’s indubitable political skills and economic prowess became profound and life changing because he understood that people must be at the centre of development initiatives, and that there must be excellence in delivering the most basic services.

Interestingly, this very point, that development must be built on people’s needs and aspirations, was only made recently by the CARICOM Secretary General while speaking on the 2016 UNDP Human Development Report. That prioritizing informs why the initiatives of Tom Adams remain so sweeping and indelible even now.

In coming years, a new set of challenges will present themselves. Government will have to deal with what the Economist calls “post truth politics” in the age of social media. There
will be the challenge of communicating with and regulating the Snapchat generation; e-government and governance. There will be the challenge of the relationship between private provision and public service, between accountability and transparency.

This 50th anniversary finds us very much, ironically, in need of a future. I am suggesting that it is imperative that we reach back and learn from the man Tom Adams and his time. Barbados needs the Tom Adams model. A Tom Adams approach, a Tom Adams vision, a Tom Adams decisiveness, a Tom Adams actualization of the dreams of a nation. I suspect that regardless of the challenges, we will be equipped to deal with them if we are informed by the Tom Adams model. He is matchless as the pre-eminent and most transformative leader in the last 50 years. So why is John Michael Geoffrey Manningham, “Tom” Adams not among the pantheon of National Heroes of Barbados? Given all that he achieved in eight and a half years, can you imagine if we had Tom Adams at this juncture of our history?

Just imagine.