

Carlton Alexander:

CARLTON ALEXANDER's major wish is that he lives to see the year 2000 and the economically vibrant Jamaica which he believes will exist at that time.

If God still extends favours based on one's philanthropy, as He did in the case of Cornelius of the Scriptures whose "alms ascended up as a memorial before God", Carlton Alexander will be around at that time. For Carlton Alexander is not only known for leading one of the richest and most powerful group of companies, Grace Kennedy, but he has used that wealth quite liberally to help the poor.

One of the most influential power brokers in the society today, Carlton Alexander does not parade it. If there is one thing striking about him, apart from

IAN BOYNE

talks to

his deep-seated patriotism, it is his equally deep-seated humility.

"I am an ordinary Jamaican with the same weaknesses as all men," says Alexander from his boardroom, high up in the Scotia Centre. "Status has never meant anything to me", he says, adding that he has been grateful for the public recognition that he has received. "I never had the thought that one day I would receive a country honour and I am grateful for that".

● Outspoken

Not only has Alexander been honoured by the Government but he is one of the few outspoken private sector spokesmen who have not generally incurred the wrath of the Left in Jamaica. Indeed, when he led the Private Sector Organisation of Jamaica in the 1970s he was seen as a restraining force on the more vehement anti-Manley faction of the private sector.

His major blunder in the Seventies with the Left was his statement that what Jamaica needed was a Government of the "best brains", whereupon he was blasted for his "elitism". Aside from that, Alexander has man-

aged to win all kinds of friends and influence even more.

When Prime Minister Seaga got together the high-powered Rockefeller Commission to spearhead investment in Jamaica, he was the Jamaican, chosen to chair it. But though he was hobnobbed with the rich and powerful of the world, he has not lost the common touch. Alexander, like all true leaders, always stands against the grain.

When panic gripped the private sector in the 1970s and fears were rife that Communism would be instituted, he avoided the intemperate remarks. "It is very unfortunate how people view happenings", he reflects. "Socialism doesn't frighten me, what bother me is Communism." Asked whether he thought the PNP is communist, he says no and says he never felt threatened in the seventies. "Jamaica has a strong democratic tradition. Many of the threats people imagined then never came through. I never left in the Seventies and will never leave. I am a Jamaican. I am not saying those who left were wrong. I believe Jamaica is one of the finest democracies in the world. Even the previous Government acted in many

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA

ways that was democratic". As a businessman with a strong social conscience, he says the problem should not be whether profits are made but what is done with those profits. "Business has an obligation to the community in which it was made".

He says one of his major criticism of the Manley era was that "we forgot that people like to be elevated and not brought down. People can't be equal. What you must have is opportunity for everyone. There is nothing wrong with elitism. Elitism can set standards of excellency. I believe the upward mobility of people here is quite good".

In the Seventies when the private sector was angry at the Government's policies, he was calling for moderation and in the eighties when the sector is expressing disquiet with the present Government's policies, he is again a voice crying out in the wilderness.

While private sector leaders can be depended on to blast Government policies at monthly meetings and over expensive lunches, Alexander has been heard calling for a revival of entrepreneurial drive, vision and strength of purpose. He strikes

some as a blind optimist or out of touch with the times, though none could accuse him of being a lackey of the Government.

● "It takes time"

"We tend to get off and blame Government too much as though the Government was able to wave a wand and magic appears. We must remember the loss of capital and skills in the Seventies. To replace that takes time and more time than many of us realise. With the downturn in the bauxite industry the plans for recovery have become harder, especially with the level of debt repayment. Things are just not easy for the Government. If the businessmen who are criticising were in Government, what would they do in the face of these problems?"

"I don't think we understand enough of what is going on and what is needed to make the country survive. People believe we can get recovery overnight, but I don't believe it. I would like to live to the Year 2,000 when I believe Jamaica will have full economic strength. I claim recovery won't be tomorrow and I defy anyone to prove otherwise. I believe the foundation is being laid to make the economy turn around."

Alexander is representative of the traditional entrepreneurial group who struggled long to build up their businesses and who absolutely reject the overnight success syndrome.

A person like Carlton Alexander, OJ, is immediately suspicious of any promise of instant success. His own rise to prominence and power was not by sudden flight.

● Childhood

BORN in Montego Bay, he left at age ten for Kingston where he resided at 26 East Street. He attended St. John's College and then Jamaica College, where he met people like Douglas Fletcher, Henry Fowler, Paul Bovell and Ken Ross. At JC he strengthened his friendship with the Matalon family, whom he had known before and who are to this day quite close to him. ("They are a wonderful family who have made a great contribution to Jamaica and I have a lot of respect for them".)

At sixteen he joined Grace Kennedy as a stock clerk, having been recommended by an uncle-in-law who was an account there. At that time there were only 17 people at the company. Today there are over 2,000 employees. Alexander had all the making of a great entrepreneur. He was inquisitive, ambitious, hard-working, resourceful and intensely people-oriented — traits which have remained with him.

"Whatever I did from my school days I always tried to be first. I always like to be on top of the class." That is where he is today in the business community, and only recently

he got the prestigious Martin Luther King Award. (He also recently became the Chairman of another major group of Companies, Seprod).

● If it's mine

Says he, "If you give me a job to do and realise it is mine, you won't have to tell me exactly how to do it.

"I am not the kind of person who will say 'this is my area and I am not doing anything else' and that what happens over there is not my concern". That was his first recipe for success. While holding the job as billing clerk, he tried to understand other areas of the company's operations because his vision was always beyond his tasks.

He became interested in the work of a Chinese salesman at the company who was also new. He says that a useful principle for anyone to follow in an organisation is to look for an area or a need in the organisation which is not being filled, rather than encroach on other people's areas." He saw at the time that the company did not know its customers well and felt that the company could not succeed without this knowledge.

He says, at that time a good day to know customers was on a Sunday when the retailers went downtown to meet the wholesalers. He says he would go downtown with the salesman, talk to customers and observe their behaviour and arguments, with a view to updating the company's service to them. Mark you, this was not Alexander's responsibility. He was simply in a hurry to succeed. When I ask about his using his own time, especially on a Sunday, to do this without

Of future economic stability, hard work, thrift

The Gleaner Flair Magazine March 4, 1986, pages 8-9

pay he says, "Days don't matter to me and hours don't. I like work. Work to me is like a hobby. He says in the early days he worked seven days, though paid for only five. Also he says he started to understudy James Moss-Solomon, a joint managing director of the company, and he spent a lot of time observing him and learning. He says he would spend time with Moss-Solomon and then catch up with his own work late in the evenings and on Saturdays.

● Hard work ethic

"I am totally against a five-day work-week. A country like Jamaica which needs production can't afford that", He says that there has always been a hard work ethic at Grace Kennedy. Also, he says, the recognition of workers and customers have for long been pivotal.

"You can't succeed in business without your workers and customers. They are your most important element."

Alexander moved from billing clerk to chief clerk, to salesman and then assistant manager in the 1940s. He became a director in the 1960s and says he doesn't even remember when he became managing director. "We never worried here about titles", he says. He speaks fondly of Fred Kennedy, who must have been impressed with his indomitable zeal and resourcefulness. He praises Kennedy as a man who always believed in recognition of his staff. In 1951 Kennedy introduced shares for workers and it was through that mechanism that Alexander started to bite into the Company investment. "I have enjoyed every bit of my work here with Grace", says the 70-year-old Alexander whose humility prompts him to downplay his good relations with his staff. "I am just maintaining a tradition started by Mr. Kennedy. There has always been a strong awareness of our responsibility for staff. From the fifties he says benefits such as medical and insurance schemes, plus superannuation, were introduced.

Did he think he would ever rise to the position of Chief Executive of the company in those early years when he was working so hard?

"In those days I believed that if I had worked hard and put out my best that I would be rewarded when the time came.

● The Youth

"My headmaster at JC used to feel that if we had the ability and failed to use it, it was a terrible thing. I felt I had a responsibility to do my best".

The best has not only paid off handsomely for him but for many Jamaicans who have benefitted from the vast sums donated by his company. He says his real ambition was to be a lawyer and he even did a course in commercial law, "but then there were few educational opportunities opened to the youth.

The youth have many opportunities today that we did not have in our time," he says.

What must blacks do to achieve greater business success? Alexander says the black man will have to learn to have more confidence in himself.

"The first thing the black man must learn is that you don't have to drive a big car or live on the top of some hill to be somebody. If you want to succeed watch the Jews and the Chinese, and you will see that their formula is thrift. We worry too much about

how we appear to others and the Jones."

He says that this point was driven home to him one day while driving with a Trinidadian taximan of Indian ethnic background. The man told him that when the black man buys a car he can't afford it and when the Indian buys one, he can afford eight!" Though Alexander himself could afford to live on "some hill" he resides at Paddington Terrace in Barbican with his third wife (he was divorced from the first, and the second died). He says he is off the cocktail circuit now because he finds that by five when he leaves work he is exhausted. He goes home to watch his "dish", consequently.

As to the controversy about the payment of the taxes on the dish, Alexander dismisses the protests of "dish" owners as "nonsense". He says he supports the move from heavy income taxes to consumption taxes. "If I have a dish I am not against paying taxes for it. What I am uptight about is a high rate of income tax. I am quite happy to pay consumption tax."

On Saturdays he spends the day playing Chinese games with some friends, listening to the races and watching American football and baseball on his Dish. He says he used to go to the race track but has stopped. He also likes cricket, soccer and tennis.

He is the father of five children and the uncle of the fiery Marxist, Mark Figueroa. While not a status-monger, he says that when he puts on a dinner he likes to do it in style. He says also that he likes to travel first class "for the comfort" and likes to dine in fine restaurants.

● If he retires

He has much to be proud of and his advice is still sought by many. He is on the boards of the Jamaica National Investment Promotions Limited, the Jamaica National Export Corporation, the Jamaica Export Credit Insurance Company and the National Commercial Bank.

He says that if he retires he would still like to serve in some area "and there is something in mind that I would like to do". I don't press him. There is something about the personality of Carlton Alexander that would restrain even the toughest interviewer. He speaks without giving any indication that time is running out for him, though we have been talking for two hours. Above his head is a photo of an eagle flying in the air, titled "The Spirit of the Entrepreneur". Alexander has the spirit.

No driving

But nature has exacted its compensation on Alexander. He admits that he is clumsy with his hands and at 70 years he has not yet learnt to drive though he has cars since 1952. He says he used to "food around" with his grandfather's car from his early years but just never got the knack of driving. He has to be driven everywhere he goes. "I am very poor with my hands, when I am at home and my wife sees me doing anything she rushes quickly and take it away from me. I am not a Mr. Fixit, I tell people I am paid to think."

He might with my hands, when I am at home and my wife sees me doing anything she rushes quickly and take it away from me. I am not a Mr. Fixit, I tell people I am paid to think."

He might not be able to drive a car, but he is still a driving force at Grace Kennedy and, indeed, in the nation.

"I am totally against a five-day work-week"

"My headmaster at JC used to feel that if we had the ability and failed to use it, it was a terrible thing".

"If you want to succeed, watch the Jews and the Chinese, and you will see that their formula is thrift"



1983— The Hon. Carlton Alexander shares his 50 years with Grace Kennedy award with his wife and Bruce Richards a director of Grace Kennedy.



A more youthful Alexander, from a 1976 Gleaner file photo.