

Carlton Alexander — A postscript

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THE tributes to the late Carlton Alexander covered many aspects of the life and service of this great Jamaican. But I think something more needs to be said about his contribution to private enterprise and the way we think about economic organisation and development in this country.

Carlton Alexander was a private enterprise man. He believed fervently in individual effort and achievement, private business in the provision of goods and services, and competition in the economic field. He was a tough competitor in business, and the success of the firm which he headed, Grace Kennedy, is testimony to this ethic and the personal qualities which he brought to bear. He was unapologetic about being a successful businessman.

The ethic which he embraced in business is similar to the ethic which all of us endorse enthusiastically in fields such as sports or the arts. We take pride in our runners, our cricketers or in a Bob Marley talent, hard work, competitive struggle, with reward going to performance and achievement. None of us expects the West Indies cricket team to give or receive quarter. We want the other team to play as hard as possible, for that is what brings out greatness, and when the West Indies wins in fair contest we are all enhanced.

In the field of economics, however, we have no such clarity of understanding and to the extent that the Jamaican ethic has been redistributionist and protectionist, to

that extent the Jamaican economy has been mired in low output, high unemployment and poverty. Fortunately, more and more of us are beginning to understand that the old approaches and economic prescriptions don't work. An increasing number of us — including some politicians unfortunately not all — are beginning to appreciate the virtues of free enterprise.

Carlton Alexander was one of a handful of business leaders who set about to change political perceptions above private business and to change the perceptions that the various sub-sectors of business had about themselves and their relation to the total economy. It was out of this effort that the Private Sector Organization of Jamaica Ltd. was born in 1976.

Single-handedly

Almost single-handedly Carlton Alexander brought together manufacturers, merchants, exporters, the financial sub-sector, tourism and small business groups who operated independently and frequently in conflict as each group defended its narrow sectoral interest. As the moving spirit and founding president of the PSOJ he put his money where his mouth was and played the major role in bringing unity and a wider perspective to the various private sector groups.

At a time of raised voices and hard words Carlton Alexander followed the path of quiet argument and persuasion; tough negotiation yes, but open confrontation, no. With practical genius and strong vision he forged a unified private sector voice and during his 5-year tenure as president of the PSOJ he

played a crucial role in nurturing the confidence of the private sector and in enlarging public understanding of the contribution of business to national development. When he gave up office the foundations had been laid for a sophisticated private sector philosophy anchored in independent economic analysis.

Carlton Alexander also understood with crystal clarity that given Jamaica's chronic balance-of-payments deficits and high import dependence, economic development was impossible without private foreign investment and a re-orientation of the economy to exports. In the last decade of his life he worked unceasingly both in his own business and in a variety of public sector capacities in pursuit of these objects. He was the Chairman of the Jamaica National Export Corporation, head of the Jamaica team in Rockefeller Commission for promoting American investment and Chairman of JAMPRO. That the results of these efforts have been mixed is no criticism of him but of a policy of bureaucratic environment which has changed with painful sloth. It is testimony to the man's commitment that his final bout of illness began while he was part of an investment promotion visit to the far east.

His generosity and social conscience have been correctly praised in every tribute which has been paid. It is important to understand that this was a logical extension of his commitment to private action, personal initiative and voluntarism. There was no conflict between private enterprise in business and private voluntary activity in non-economic fields. He believed in helping the economically defenceless and in nurturing youthful talent.

For us in the PSOJ Carlton Alexander there might never have been a PSOJ. From a personal viewpoint, which I am sure I share with others, the many hours spent talking to this outstanding Jamaican has given me a perspective of Jamaica which has helped in realising his vision of an independent, confident, and caring private sector. It can be truly said of Carlton Alexander that Jamaica is the poorer for his passing. Let us hope now that others will rise above personal interest in maintaining the tradition of the acceptable face of capitalism he