

# Carlton Alexander - the modest, caring giant of integrity

by Elaine Ferguson

The following interview with the Hon. Carlton Alexander, former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Grace Kennedy and Company Limited took place a couple months before his death and focussed on his attitude towards power and influence and tried to find out more about the personality of this corporate giant.

"I believe that the greatest asset a man has is his word and in business, if a person cannot accept your word you are in trouble. I hope that all the people I deal with know that I am a man of my word, this is very important to me, once you have given your word that's it, that's binding, you don't have to sign documents. I am probably the person that signs the fewest agreements or documents. We have a union for the workers in our warehouse, I have never signed a union agreement but I have never gone back on my word in dealing with them."

J.R. How does it feel to be regarded as one of the most powerful and influential man in the country?"

C.A. Power and influence are two things that I really don't dwell on in my day to day operations but I would be naive to believe that in my position and during my business career, the questions of power and influence have not arisen.

These are two very important factors that people of leadership use, but to me these are responsibilities that should be exercised with the greatest amount of integrity, honesty, fair play and justice.

In my opinion, those of us who have attained positions such as I have, have a great responsibility as to how we perform our duties and how we are seen to exercise those duties to the interest, the best interest of all concerned.

In my job as Chief Executive Officer at Grace Kennedy, it is incumbent on me at all times to see to it that the interest of the company is protected and obviously, for what I am paid, I must see to it that I use ... not necessarily my position, but my ability to improve the profitability of the company for the benefit of the shareholders and the employees.

Having done that, and with the position that the company holds, you also have an obligation and a responsibility to the community and the country at large. It is a responsibility that can never be overlooked. I would rather have my company viewed as a company of importance, rather than as powerful.

J.R. Are you comfortable with the designation of "capitalist?"

C.A. I have been foremost in pointing out that I have no quarrel with or excuse for profit. I can perhaps claim to be the first head of a company who has said over the years that I have no apology for profit, what I have always maintained is that what is important is what is done with profit.

I still maintained this and I have exercised it and I am very happy to see that many other corporations are also doing this and are acting as good corporate citizens.

There is the shareholders interest, there is the employees

interest and there is the fact that the community must get back, must benefit from that profit that is made within the area that the company occupies.

J.R. Would you say that your position has influenced your behaviour?

C.A. Most definitely. What concerns me is how people who hold positions such as I do are seen by the public. I hope that how I behave not only in my job in my day to day operations at the office but the in my overall extra-mural interest is of benefit to the country.

I do hope that I am seen in this influential position as one who uses influence not for personal gain or in a way to abuse power or to be vindictive or to do any of the things that are not accepted by the society.

I hope that I am seen as a person who is an honest person, a person of integrity and a caring person and who has the interest of the country at heart and who at all times can be depended on to give of his best not for personal gain but to benefit the people employed to him and the community and the nation.

J.R. As a corporate giant, have you been accused of manipulating the market?

C.A. It is felt that people in positions of influence manipulate market forces, this is a totally wrong concept. People in business all have common interests. This interest comes from dealing in the market place and then it is the market place that dictates.

That is why I like the market and do not like controls, the market place dictates how you have to perform.

If your goods are not of good quality, are incorrectly priced, then you cannot gain market share.

Also the service to your customers has to be excellent and this cannot be manipulated. In dealing with government, it is very important that business people who have common interests are united in presenting their interests to government.

J.R. Are you part of a powerful lobby group?

C.A. Definitely - lobbying for what is in the best interest of business. I am a strong believer in private enterprise and persons who use their initiative and creativity. I don't like, and I will repeat it, I do not like controls and I do not think that controls in any form succeed.

What succeeds better is when people are allowed to compete freely against each other within the conditions of what the country has to lay down. To succeed in this business you have to give good service and fairplay to the consumer.

J.R. Would you describe yourself as a ruthless businessman?

C.A. I do not feel that I am ruthless, but let me say this, when it comes to getting business for my company, I will go all out. I am very aggressive and will not hesitate to go for it, but at the end of the day I don't believe in doing anything to hurt people. Whatever I do in business there is fairplay and justice for all concerned.

J.R. Grace Kennedy, the multi-national, has been accused of swallowing up its small competitors. Is this correct?

C.A. Sometimes smaller companies are concerned with how they do business with us. It is not our desire to take over small companies and we have not really taken small companies by deliberate action. We have had occasions where small companies get in trouble and we step in. One particular instance, was how we got Paper Processors. Four distributors of Jamaica Packaging took over the business after it got in financial difficulties. We actually buy from a lot of small companies and hopefully we will continue to do so. If there are any companies that can be bought or that are available we certainly will be in the market to look at it. This is our business, but we do not go



out of our way deliberately to hurt any small company so that if they tumble down, we are there to pick it up. We are not into that.

J.R. Jamaica has been described as a capitalist society run by interlocking elites. Do you agree with this?  
C.A. I strongly disagree. I have been working for 56 years and

pride of your company which has made a number of significant strides. What else do you wish to achieve?

C.A. As a company, we have the largest volume of any company in Jamaica. I rather wish that I had the largest bottomline and maybe I would get to that one day but more importantly... Fortune magazine once did an assessment of American com-

Of course, we are living in an age where labour often has to be replaced by machines, but the thing to do it to retrain these people how to use the machines. I am also concerned when people lose their jobs, there is nothing in place - no unemployment benefits - to cushion the blow... and its effects on the family.

This bothers me as I experienced this, the loss of a breadwinner, as a child, when my father died. This experience would have made some people bitter. It has not made me bitter, it has made me more caring.

J.R. You speak so often of 'we'. Is Carlton Alexander and Grace Kennedy one and the same?

C.A. (smilingly) It is difficult to divorce the two, as for so many years it has been the centre of my activities and has influenced the way I live.

J.R. Please share with me a little of your association with the company, your move to Chief Executive Officer and some of the difficulties experienced.

C.A. I started at Grace Kennedy in 1933 at the age of 18/19. It was a young company with dynamic managers - Mr. Moss-solomon who was very sound but cautious and Mr. Kennedy who was young and adventurous and a born entrepreneur. Working with people like those you learnt a lot and Kennedy was always prepared to give you a chance. Both of them allowed you to use initiative and creativity, you were not kept down. They were also totally committed to developing a company and ploughing back the profits into the company instead of using it for personal gain. That absolutely motivated you to work. I realized from early that for me to succeed I had to be able to show that I could produce to enhance the company and that I proceeded to do.

J.R. Were there any stumbling blocks?

C.A. No major ones. The atmosphere and the environment was right and I made up my mind that I wanted to succeed, especially since I was the breadwinner for my family - my mother and eight brothers and sisters. I also got married at the age of 21, which added greater responsibility. So I learnt from an early age to accept responsibility.

There were times when I ran into problems by exceeding some of the authority I had, but I plotted my path and the main path I plotted was how to succeed.

What I found out when I joined the company, was that the management knew very little about the customers and did not know the customers very well. I picked up this very quickly and I set out to develop a very strong relationship with customers which made me what I am today. This I have maintained and it is perhaps one of my strongest points - customer relationships.



Hon. Carlton Alexander O. J.

during that time I have seen a lot of changes take place in the society and I have seen a lot of new companies come on the marketplace, I have seen old ones disappear, and I see a lot of new faces who are very influential in the business community and there are many of them, it is not what some people believe it to be.

Naturally if somebody has something they are going to protect it, nobody is going to hand you something on a platter. You have to work to earn your spurs and work hard.

A number of young companies have come in the field, grown over the years and have become quite large. Look at the progress the Matalon family has made. They are giants today, and this is only since World War Two.

We welcome them. Look at the progress Desmond Blades at Mussons has made.

But it needs to be understood that nobody is going to slap you on your back and say come in and chat, it's nice to have you. It's just like your newspaper. Oliver Clarke is not going to ring you up and say 'lets share the market'.

What is great is that people have the opportunity of getting into a market and that is why I don't like controls if you have monopolies or controls then it hinders people from getting into a market.

Obviously anybody who can hold onto something will but if you have a free market everybody will have a fair chance. There are some things that are difficult to free up in Jamaica because there is no competition from suppliers so those people are often protected.

J.R. You speak with obvious

panies to find out which is the most admired company in the United States. My real main objective is to be the most admired company.

When you are the most admired, there are a number of different aspects to the things you have to do. You have to be concerned with your shareholders interest; how well your management performs, your product lines, how well they are received in the marketplace, how well you perform your corporate duties to

your community and to your country, your employees, relationships with clients.

J.R. How would you describe your relations with trade unions?

C.A. Very cordial over the years, from the time of Fred Kennedy, who in those early years worked, especially on the wharves, with Sir Alexander Bustamante and later with Hugh Shearer, Michael Manley and the other giants who were instrumental in the formation of the Joint Industrial Councils.

I have always recognised the rights of workers to join a trade union of their choice, and there has always been fairplay on both sides, but I maintain and I keep preaching that whether a worker is represented by a union or not, that worker is an employee of Grace Kennedy and as such is my responsibility. I cannot renege on my responsibility to my workers.

That is why I have to work hard to maintain the viability of the company, so that workers can have both a fair deal and a job. I am a little foolish, perhaps, but I hate to see people lose their jobs and I believe that retrenchment should be the last thing that one should resort to.



J.R. What is your philosophy of life?

C.A. I enjoy life. I was taught by my mother that worrying over anything does not solve the problem and that each day is a new day for living and that what is important is to be very positive about the future.

I firmly believe in, as I have said over and over, in using opportunity, in hard work for the benefit of all.

I love to work, I enjoyed work from childhood, Work is not labour to me. In our business you have to be prepared to be able to meet what is likely to take place, so that it does not catch you flatfooted.

J.R. How do you spend your leisure time?

C.A. I like to be with people, I used to enjoy going to clubs, I enjoy sport, I am a great lover of horseracing although I don't attend today and I like to travel, read and I enjoy being with my family and being with my wife.

J.R. Are there any conditions in the country that you feel strongly about?

C.A. I hold strong beliefs where teachers and education are concerned and try in my own way to see if I can influence changes at that level. I would also like to be able to do something for the nurses.

I am very very concerned that such outstanding people and citizens who are giving so much of themselves and their services, get such little reward or regard and I think the country owes teachers, nurses and other people like the security forces a great debt.

What I would love to do is to be able do more for education. So many of us who came from very poor families and what we really owe our basic success to is the fact that we had an education. I was fortunate to have received a scholarship to Jamaica College.

That put me in good stead and I have never forgotten and I feel that I can never give back to Jamaica College enough for what I got out of it, especially since my two sons were educated free there.

They also have to realize that they have to give back something. I believe that if every person who had been educated in this country were to give back to the schools what he/she got out of them then a lot of the problems could be overcome.

J.R. What upsets you most in others?

C.A. Dishonesty. I can be a very forgiving person, but there is no forgiving where theft is concerned or any dishonesty. I am also very very proud of Grace Kennedy and from time to time, I don't mind if anybody wants to insult me personally, but don't insult my company, and don't try and pull my company down.

J.R. Do you have any pet quirks?

C.A. I am a great believer in dress. I don't believe in dressing sloppily for work, or even for sport. Take our company's netballers, when they go out there, I like to have them nicely attired and seen as ladies and on court I expect them to behave and thank goodness they have behaved very well up to now and I am proud of their achievements.

If from time to time they happen to win the prize for the best dressed team, they know I will be happy because they have gone out there properly groomed, which is important. I just don't like people who do not groom themselves properly especially at the work place because I am a great believer that this has a lot to do with how you perform your duties and in your attitude.

J.R. It has been said that you have not seen the need for a public relations officer in the company, is this correct?

C.A. Absolutely. Each staff member should do public relations for the company. I tell my staff that when they go out into the field they represent me, they are my ambassadors and I expect them to behave in a certain way.

If they are right, praise is given or nothing is said, if they are wrong I will certainly chastise them, but one thing, I will always back them.

J.R. Are there any final comments you wish to make?

C.A. I have enjoyed this interview very much, you gave me a lot of things to think about and I hope I have been able to tell you a lot of the things that really make up my personality and to share my feelings about my company and to make others see me as a Jamaican, who is totally committed to the country and its development.