

SANGSTER Sir Donald Burns

# Donald Burns Sangster...

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# A long record of service in Jamaican politics

## By...A POLITICAL REPORTER

Sir Donald Sangster, the second Prime Minister of independent Jamaica, had the longest record of public service in the political fraternity up to the time of his death.

He had just turned 21 when he was elected to the local government council of St. Elizabeth. They called them parochial boards in those days. That was in 1933 when voting qualification was restricted to incomes and property-owning above a certain level. He remained a parish councillor continuously since then, except for a year's interruption between 1955 and 1956.

Sir Donald grew out of a middle-class farming family in St. Elizabeth. His father, the late William B. Sangster, was a Commissioned Land Surveyor who combined this work with cattle rearing. His mother, Cassandra, was the daughter of Oscar Plummer, a writer-historian. One of his uncles, Peter Watt Sangster, was one of a small group of native legislators, led by the late J. A. G. Smith, who set out to resist the absolute power of the British Governors in the years between the two world wars.

Sir Donald Sangster himself was the product of Munro College (1921 to 1929), one of the most fashionable secondary schools of his youth. There he made his mark in cricket, football, athletics, boxing and in the gymnasium. He was still studying to be a solicitor when he was first elected to the parish council. When he was admitted as a solicitor in 1937, he was then 26 years old. The labour upheaval came in 1938 and brushed lightly across St. Elizabeth. Donald Sangster fixed his attention exclusively on parish needs. He got his foot on the second rung of the political ladder in 1941 when he was elected Vice-Chairman of the St. Elizabeth Parochial Board.

Meantime, the people of Jamaica were being gradually mobilised at two social levels: at the trade union level under the leadership of Alexander Bustamante to make new economic advances for wage-workers; and at the political level under the leadership of Norman Manley to make an independent nation out of a 300-year colony. Donald leaned sympathetically to both movements, but remained on the sidelines.

A new Constitution was won from the British Colonial Office that offered Jamaica the first step towards independence. It provided for a wholly-elected House of Representatives based on universal adult suffrage and an

Executive Council, one half of which was selected from the House, that was to be the principal instrument of government policy. General elections on this basis were scheduled for December 1944. Donald Sangster entered the electoral contest as an Independent for the constituency of South St. Elizabeth. He was badly crushed between the two major parties: the JLP, that had been stitched together six months earlier out of the structure of the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union; and the PNP. The JLP's Burnett Coke took the seat.

Undaunted, Donald Sangster turned back to the needs of his parish. He was elected Chairman of the Parochial Board in 1949. Then, that same year, with the second general elections under universal adult suffrage coming up, he took the fateful step that shaped his future political career; he joined the Jamaica Labour Party.

This time, running as a JLP candidate, he took the South St. Elizabeth seat and was appointed Minister for Social Welfare in the new Government, succeeding in this embryonic Ministry Frank Pixley who had lost his seat in Central Kingston to the PNP's Wills Isaacs.

## Leader of the House

With the start of the JLP's second term in office in 1950, the party began to streamline its structure. One of the changes rung was Donald Sangster's appointment as Deputy Leader of the party to Bustamante. When the JLP's Minister of Finance, Sir Harold Allan, died in 1953, Donald Sangster was put into the vacant Ministry and given the added responsibility of Leader of the House.

The year before, the British Colonial Office began to prod the West Indian island governments seriously towards a federal union. The JLP Government went along listlessly as the PNP Opposition displayed an enthusiastic interest. The British got the West Indies to set up a Regional Economic Conference to put the islands on an integrated economic base as a prelude to Federation. Donald Sangster as the most articulate supporter of the federal idea in the JLP was put on the REC as Jamaica's delegate.

But the impetus towards Federation of the West Indies was sluggish. The greater political concentration was

reserved for domestic affairs. In office, the JLP Government seemed fairly satisfied with the semi-colonial structure. But the PNP Opposition kept up the pressure for further constitutional changes that would hasten the steps toward independence.

The liberal British Governor, Sir Hugh Foot, sensing the changes afloat in the waning British Empire as a whole, pressed both parties into a forward move with the first constitutional amendment that brought real responsibility to the people's representatives: the inauguration of the Ministerial System under which five of the electives took charge of all the Government departments except the police, the army, the judiciary and external relations.

That was when Donald Sangster became a real Minister of Finance. But this condition was not to last for long. Less than two years later electoral luck changed temporarily. The JLP went down to defeat by the PNP in February 1955—and Donald Sangster himself was one of the major casualties: he had the tables turned on him by his old rival, Burnett Coke, who had resigned from the JLP in 1947, ran and lost under the PNP banner in 1949, but made it with the PNP tide in 1955.

For the next year, Donald Sangster concentrated on his law practice, but kept his political hand in by lending assistance to the BITU. A court decision ousted the JLP's George Peryer from his seat in Northeast Clarendon for an election offence committed during the 1955 contests. The JLP put Donald Sangster into the 1956 by-election: a safe berth that he made even safer through all the elections since.

From 1955 onwards the PNP Government increased the pace of development of the West Indies Federation. The federal union was formally inaugurated in 1958 with Jamaica having a bi-partisan approach. But when the federal strains developed as early as 1959, the PNP Government sought changes in the federal structure that was slated to become an independent nation by 1963.

Two main committees, the political and the economic, were set up in Port of Spain, Trinidad, to negotiate the changes. Donald Sangster went to all their meetings as the representative of the JLP Opposition right up to 1960 when, on the occasion of a federal by-election for Jamaica's St. Thomas seat, the JLP suddenly aboutfaced and threatened to have Jamaica secede from the Federation if the party ever became the Government of the island in the future.

This was the end of the bi-partisan policy on the federal issue. The then Premier, Mr. Manley, announced that his Government would conduct a Referendum to allow the people to decide whether Jamaica should remain in the Federation or not. This Referendum was held on September 19, 1961, with the JLP advising secession and the PNP advocating the maintenance of the federal link.

## Remained loyal

Despite his personal views of support for the Federation, Donald Sangster remained loyal to his party's policy in favour of secession and he played a major role in the Referendum campaign. In the end, the voters returned a majority of 38,942 for secession. So both parties combined to draw up a new Constitution for an independent Jamaica. Donald Sangster sat on the bi-partisan drafting committee of both Houses of Parliament.

The committee completed its work within three months and Donald Sangster was there when the formal instruments of independence were negotiated in London with the British Government in January 1962, with new general elections fixed for April of that year.

The JLP scored a signal victory of 26 seats to the PNP's 19, and in the new Government Donald Sangster returned to his old portfolio of Minister of Finance as well as Leader of the House. Shortly after independence on August 6, 1962, he was named Deputy Prime Minister to Sir Alexander Bustamante.

For two decades before independence, Donald Sangster had served on a widely-ranging number of public boards and committees. He had been a member of the Manning Home Advisory Committee and of the East and West St. Elizabeth School Boards; he had been a Director of Jamaica Vegetables Ltd. from 1943 to 1949. He played a prominent part in the scouting activities of his native parish, and captained the Nethersole Cricket team from his parish in 1949.

He had been a member of the Munro and Dickenson Trust, the Black River Drainage and Irrigation Board. Between 1950 and 1952 he had been Jamaica's delegate to conferences in New Zealand, Ceylon, Barbados, London and Canada. In addition, he was a member of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Jamaica, a connection he maintained with pride up to the time of his death.

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P14.

## Financial spokesman

Independence opened the door to new opportunities for Donald Sangster to make a more deliberate impact in the affairs of his country. He sat on the Jamaican delegation that received formal admission to the United Nations in New York on September 18, 1962. The next day he flew to Washington to lead the delegation that received the nation's formal admission to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank at a meeting addressed by the late American President John F. Kennedy.

Over the next year and a half, as the nation's chief financial spokesman, he attended a number of international conferences at which he cumulatively built up the image of Jamaica as a new nation of moderation and stability. His personal urbanity and friendliness stamped him as a unique character who attracted an equally warm response that loaded the bag of the nation's indefinable assets.

The year 1964 was barely three months old when the severest testing period began for Donald Sangster. The Prime Minister, Sir Alexander, fell ill, requiring major surgery on his eye. He was flown to a Washington hospital, leaving Sir Donald to act as Prime Minister. Sir Alexander got through the surgery successfully, returned home early in June to resume his office but with a reduced work load. Sir Donald kept on doing the Prime Minister's routine chores dutifully through the rest of the year.

Then, in January 1965, Sir Alexander was stricken again, this time with a series of strokes that incapacitated him. So began Sir Donald's two-year stretch as Acting Prime Minister that tested to the full all his qualities of diplomacy, forbearance, doggedness and equanimity. For all practical purposes, he was in charge of the Government, but he was hardly his own master.

The Rhodesian crisis flared up to cut harsh divisions within the Commonwealth. Sir Donald went to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference in July 1965 to lend a firm but moderating voice in favour of a tough policy by the British Government against the rebel Rhodesian regime. He increased the Jamaica impact when the Commonwealth Prime Ministers reconvened their conference in Lagos, Nigeria, in January 1966. He expressed the conference's skepticism over the effectiveness of British economic sanctions against the rebel regime, but, allowing that the Rhodesian rebellion was a British responsibility, threw his weight behind the policy of

letting the British handle the situation in their own way.

Sir Donald gained a good stature as a parliamentarian, that reached throughout the Commonwealth. He had been a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association since 1950 and his eminence in this field was recognized with his election as Chairman of the CPA for 1964/65.

At home, Sir Donald faced more difficult, complex problems. There was the minor revolt in his Cabinet when Mr. Wilton Hill, the Minister without Portfolio from the Senate, resigned over his decision to exempt all non-Jamaicans on the academic staff of the University of the West Indies from the provisions of the Work Permits Law.

Sir Donald rode that one firmly, readjusted the Senate by bringing Mr. George Ranglin from the President's chair into the Cabinet to replace Mr. Hill.

Then there was the even more intricate situation when inter-party violence began to rake Western Kingston from last year April. No politician abhorred violence more sincerely than Sir Donald and the fact that adherents of his own party were among the active combatants added a heavy weight to his responsibility.

Then, to load him down more desperately, came the discovery of the first signs of the cerebral trouble that finally took his life in Montreal.

Towards the end of September last year, Sir Donald flew privately to Montreal for a check-up by a neuro-specialist. The diagnosis confirmed a dangerous tendency towards high blood pressure. There was no immediate danger, but the warning was grim. And the day he returned home with this fearful knowledge, the first news that greeted him was the decision to declare a State of Emergency in the city's west-end.

He steered the nation through the month-long emergency, reassuring the fearful with wise moderation at the same time that he faced down the lawless minority with firm strength.

One of the main difficulties Sir Donald had to endure was the fact that he had to carry for two years the full responsibility of office within the shadow of the incapacitated Sir Alexander Bustamante. He was in the position of a captain of an aircraft who was likely to have the controls wrenched out of his hands at any moment. He bore this paradoxical situation without complaint. But his patient endurance paid off in January last when Sir Alexander took the momentous decision to retire from public life.

## Loyalty tested

There was no question as to his successor. Sir Donald had been Sir Alexander's chief lieutenant since 1950. His loyalty had been tested more than once and proven beyond any doubt. His standing within the party was also unquestioned. Year after year he had been re-elected First Deputy Leader without opposition until the 1966 JLP conference last November. Then Mr. Robert Lightbourne, who had been named Acting Deputy Prime Minister in January 1966, challenged him for the post of First Deputy Leader. The result was a massive 3-1 victory for Sir Donald.

So, with Sir Alexander's decision to retire at last made, Sir Donald was free for the first time to make the crucial decisions affecting the Government and the party. He decided to call new general elections, fixed February 21 as polling day. The results are fresh in everybody's memory. He led the JLP to a smashing victory over the PNP Opposition of 33 seats to 20. The next day he was sworn in as Prime Minister. Sir Donald had become master of his own house.

The new Prime Minister went cautiously about picking his team. For a start he re-appointed all the former Cabinet Ministers to their old portfolios, adding only Mr. Hugh Shearer, who had won Sir Alexander's Clarendon seat, and giving him one of his own portfolios, External Affairs.

Then he picked the Government's side of 13 Senators, three of whom he designated as Ministers: Sir Neville Ashenheim, Mr. Ailan Douglas and Mr. Hector Wynter; and three as parliamentary secretaries: Dr. Arthur Burt, Mr. Cyril Atkinson and Mr. Ivan Moore. He completed the slate of parliamentary secretaries with three from the House: Mr. William McLaren, Mr. Wycliffe Martin and Mr. Taelus Golding.

Then the new Prime Minister summoned both chambers of Parliament for the formal swearing-in of the members on March 15. The PNP boycotted the sittings. Sir Donald made a passing reference to their absence. He concluded his brief speech with these words:

"In pledging our support to you, Mr. Speaker, in your ensuing term, we also pledge to do our best for all the people of Jamaica without fear or favour."

Those proved to be Sir Donald's last words in public. That afternoon he went up to the military bungalow, Bush Cottage, at Newcastle to work on the Budget. He worked steadily until Friday evening.

He was shaving early on Saturday morning when he got the first cerebral seizure. The maid found him on the floor of the bathroom, called the Sergeant for help. He was brought down to his official home, Vale Royal, where a team of doctors went to work on him. They diagnosed the cerebral complaint, advised his going to Montreal where the famed Neurological Institute is located.

Sir Donald was flown out on an American Government aircraft on Monday night, reached the Institute in the early hours of Tuesday. Later that day the specialists discovered the cerebral haemorrhage. Gradually the Prime Minister sank into a coma.

And thus he passed away unprotesting.

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