

Michael Manley - A personal perspective

- Norman Girvan -

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I would like to start by addressing directly the Caribbean members of the audience. I want to say this to you: know your history; know your culture; know your roots; know your heroes and your heroines. For if you don't know where you're coming from, you won't have a sense of self, a sense of purpose, and a sense of direction.

So this is about Michael Manley. It is a personal perspective.

Michael Manley was born to privilege, but he spent most of his life fighting down the entrenched structures of privilege in his native Jamaica and in the wider world. His father, Norman Manley, had been in his youth an outstanding athlete, and was a veteran of World War I, who went on to become Jamaica's most outstanding barrister of his day, and then to become, in effect, the father of the Jamaican nation. If Garvey's mission was black pride and pan-Africanism, and Bustamante's was to launch a national labour movement, Norman Manley's was to launch the national movement for self-determination and to forge a national identity where none existed before.

In the closing speech of his political career, the elder Manley declared that the mission of his generation was to secure political independence, while winning economic independence was the mission of the generation to follow. The younger Manley was to take up the challenge. The goal proved elusive. Today, some would say it is irrelevant in the era of globalisation. I beg to differ. Its substantive significance, I will argue remains as relevant at the close of the 90s as it was at the beginning of the 1970s.

Michael's mother, Edna Manley, was a brilliant and talented artist whose forte was sculpture. She is widely credited with inspiring and nurturing the Jamaican art movement that paralleled the emergence of the nationalist movement of the 1930s-1940s--and hence, with being the "mother" of Jamaican art. Michael Manley grew up in a household in which political ideas and events were the fodder of daily conversation, artistic expression was a passion, and sport a subject of continuing interest, in a family which had embraced service to the nation as a lifelong vocation. When Michael won the leadership of the Peoples National Party in 1969, in an election in which everyone agrees his father maintained strict neutrality, an intergenerational cycle of political leadership was confirmed. But it was a tradition, not a dynasty.

Throughout Michael's own life, he seemed to wrestle with the manifold drives of his two unusual parents: of political struggle, of love of sport, and of artistic expression; the mind, the body and the spirit. The tension, if never fully resolved, became the wellspring of his own unique brand of creativity. There are still those who argue that of his books, which included *A Voice At the Workplace*, *The Politics of Change*, and *Struggle in the Periphery*, the best is the last--his monumental *History of West Indies Cricket*. His parents were indeed a hard act to follow. But for Michael, theirs were the only act he *could* follow.

As a youth, Michael signaled his instinctive intolerance of injustice when he chose to leave, prematurely, the elite high school, Jamaica College, rather than to accept a caning from a headmaster widely regarded as a symbol of Jamaica's colonial educational culture. As his father was, by that time, already campaigning against Jamaica's colonial political order, it is a safe bet that Michael was applying at school the political principles he was learning at home. After a stint with the Royal Canadian Air Force he went to the London School of Economics, where he majored in Government and was strongly influenced by the great socialist political philosopher, Harold Laski.

His involvement with the cause of labour began almost immediately after his return to Jamaica in 1951. It was his mission to organise the National Workers Union as the Trade Union base of the PNP, which had recently lost its base in the labour movement as a result of the expulsion of the Marxist left in the Party, which controlled the Trades Union Congress. Michael soon established a reputation as a skilled negotiator who combined an excellent grasp of the tactics of bargaining with a remarkable capacity to communicate complex issues with great simplicity and, in doing so, to find common ground between management and labour.

If it was his strength, it may also have been his weakness. The experience of a remarkable string of successfully resolved labour disputes in which he was able, in effect, to persuade management to make concessions in their own long-term self-interest, was to be put to use in the 1970s. In effect, Michael tried to reform Jamaica's entrenched structure of class and economic power by a combination of mobilisation of the masses and persuasion of the classes. On the international front he campaigned for a New International Economic Order by a combination of strategic alliances with radical governments in the South and progressive leaders in the North, supported by careful reasoning and brilliant rhetoric. But, as we now know, the structures of power, both domestic and international proved stubbornly impervious to the formula that had seemed to work so well in labour-management negotiations. Perhaps the confidence in his own capacities which Michael had developed in his Trade Union years made him unduly optimistic about the possibilities for negotiated change. But I anticipate myself.

One cannot fail to note that Michael's vision for labour developed beyond immediate concerns of wages and working conditions to embrace broader questions of worker power. The fraternal relations that Michael developed with Hugh Shearer of the BITU, and their joint bargaining with the sugar and bauxite industries, spoke of an approach in which Trade Union rivalry was subordinated to the broader interests of the workers.

Further, in *A Voice at the Workplace*, Michael Manley outlined his proposals for worker participation in management – a programme that was to be adopted as official policy in the 1970s and resurrected in the 1990s in the form of an Employee Share Ownership Scheme.

My own father, Thom Girvan, worked with Norman Manley in the Jamaica Welfare movement which the latter founded in 1937. I myself first met Michael Manley in the early 1960s. At that time I could have been described as a Leftist nationalist, and Michael was, if anything, suspicious of the Left which tended to view his father, and by extension him, as an irredeemable “middle-of-the-roader”. After his election to the Party leadership in 1969, however, Michael Manley welded together a remarkable coalition of PNP old guard, young black nationalists, socialist populists and disenchanted capitalists, to sweep the polls in 1972. The Manley Administration set about implementing the most sweeping programme of social and economic reform that Jamaica has ever seen in so short a time. The aim was to drastically reduce unemployment, poverty and inequality; to distribute land to landless small farmers; to guarantee the rights of workers, women, and those born out of wedlock; to provide training and educational opportunities for the disadvantaged and excluded, and to wrest the levers of economic control from the multinational corporations and the local elite. Internationally, he joined the campaign led by OPEC nations, for a New International Economic Order, fought for an end to the isolation of Cuba, campaigned militantly against apartheid, and generally became a thorn in the flesh of Uncle Sam.

Helped by the revenues from the bauxite levy, the Democratic Socialist project prospered at first and Manley’s PNP won an overwhelming election victory in 1976. But the consequences of capital flight, retaliation by the bauxite companies, a US-sponsored campaign of economic and political destabilisation, and excessive public spending, brought the economy to the brink of bankruptcy and into the jaws of the IMF. I joined the Administration in early 1977 as part of a group charged with finding an alternative production programme to the package of devaluation and spending cuts advocated by the Fund. In the end Manley went to the Fund, largely because there was at the time a sympathetic Administration in Washington and neither the Soviets nor the oil-rich states could come up with the money that the Fund could offer.

The rest, as they say, is history. The private sector never put their confidence back in the PNP. In spite of the IMF programmes, investment continued to falter and the economy continued to deteriorate. The 1980 election was to be fought in a setting marked by acute shortages of basic goods, growing unemployment, and extreme violence. The people, whom Michael loved, and who loved him, voted him out of office. They had their reasons. Two remarks, in my view, summed it up. In the words of one man: “I love Michael, but I voted for Mr. Seaga because he knows how to get the money. Next time I’ll vote for Michael because he knows how to spend it.” And in the words of one woman: “I love Michael, and that’s why I voted for the Labour Party. If the PNP had won, the Police and the Army would have taken over, and they would have killed him.” Such is the wisdom of the working people.

But for Michael Manley it was perhaps the bitterest disappointment of his life. It is impossible, in my view, to understand Manley's later ideological turnaround without a sense of the trauma that the 1980 defeat inflicted on him. To add to this, there was the dramatic shift in the global balance of power in the decade of the 1980s, a decade that began with the ascendance to power of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, that continued with the Latin American debt crisis and the entrenchment of neoliberalism and structural adjustment, and that ended with the collapse of state socialism and of the Soviet Union. If Manley had embraced the theology of globalisation and the market by 1989 when he was re-elected to office, it stemmed from his own personal disillusionment with the negative aspects of the 1970s experience, together with a pragmatic reading of the global constellation of forces. He was in effect doing penance for the harm, which the polarised politics of the 1970s had done to the people and to his beloved Jamaica. There was, in my humble opinion, a genuine conviction that the market could succeed where the state had failed, in bringing improved conditions of life for the population. And for Michael, it was results that mattered.

What can one say now, of these policies, after the structural adjustment of the 1980s and the currency and financial liberalisation of the 1990s, and as the juggernaut of market and financial globalisation tries to sweep aside everything in its path? Sadly, the Jamaican economy has continued to falter, with little growth or negative growth in the 1980s and 1990s, steep devaluation - after Guyana, Jamaica's currency is the lowest in the English-speaking Caribbean - and recurrent bouts of high inflation and high interest rates. The experience of currency and financial liberalisation has been disastrous, with a bill for financial assistance to troubled financial institutions that now approaches US\$1.6 billion, equivalent to about one-quarter of Jamaica's annual GDP.

As for globalisation, it should be clear to everyone after the Asian financial crisis that this is nothing but a façade for the untrammelled power of global players on global financial markets, and of the Transnational Corporations, to garner profits whenever and wherever they wish throughout the globe, no matter what the social and political costs, and that far from meaning the end of the nation state, it weakens some and strengthens others, particularly the United States.

In other words, the neoliberal experience shows that that there is no substitute for a socially managed economy, both nationally and internationally, an economy in which the market is guided and regulated by an active and democratically governed state, in partnership with business and with an active civil society, including organised labour and a wide spectrum of citizens organizations. And this principle holds true for the global economy, if global poverty and inequality are to be effectively addressed, and if the planet's life support systems are to be sustained in the interest of present and future generations. *In short, the market, whether national or global, must be subordinated to the Common Good.*

Michael Manley's death, one year ago, elicited a collective outpouring of love amongst Jamaicans, the likes of which I have never seen before. The closest thing, in my experience, was the love poured out to Nelson Mandela on his triumphal visit in 1991

though, I have to say, I was not in Jamaica at the time of the funeral of Bob Marley in 1981 or of Norman Manley in 1969.

The newspapers' banner headlines, for coverage occupying the entire front page in several editions, tell the story: "NATION MOURNS MANLEY", "THEY CALLED HIM JOSHUA", "FAREWELL, MICHAEL". "HERO'S FAREWELL", "MANLEY BURIED".

As I read the papers one year later in preparing this tribute, I could feel the chills running up and down my spine, and I began to choke up, as I did when I filed with thousands of others past his lifeless body, and thought about the Michael Manley of the 1970s, this beacon of hope, this David who took on Goliath, who stirred the minds of men and the hearts of women with his eloquence, his passion, his vision, and his love. The tributes from every quarter are revealing:

From Lloyd Goodleigh, President of the Caribbean Congress of Labour: "A custodian of this nation has passed away. That leader has gone. His watch has ended...From our vantagepoint, and for my generation – English colonialism sought to assure us that history was made in Europe and in the United States, and that in places like Jamaica, time only passed. Michael Manley, by a fusion of Faith, Action, Politics and Culture, demonstrated that the view was a lie."

From a political opponent, Bruce Golding: "Michael Manley, more than anyone else since Marcus Mosiah Garvey, must be credited for raising the political consciousness of the Jamaican people and motivating them to political action."

From Owen Arthur, Prime Minister of Barbados: "He was one of the Caribbean's heroic political figures. His capacity to move people and to change society by the power of his oratory, ideals and personality evoked images of Martin Luther King.... Michael Manley was surely the greatest Caribbean orator of this century."

From Julius Nyerere: "...his participation in the struggle for international democracy, so that the Rights of developing countries should be respected in both political and economic affairs, was an aspect of that same commitment."

From Fidel Castro: "I have lost a friend."

From Harry Belafonte: "...a remarkable human being..."

From Andrew Young: "...a courageous leader..."

From Jimmy Carter: "...a true hero, whose courageous and principled leadership was a blessing to Jamaica."

From Tony Blair: "...he played a key role in spreading the message of social justice and economic progress to the people of the Caribbean and Latin America."

Rex Nettleford quoted one of the world's leading newspapers: "For death to claim Cheddi Jagan and Michael Manley on the very same day is one of those double blows of which history is arbitrarily capable, and a loss not just to the people of the Caribbean. Their passing deprives Guyana and Jamaica of their most inspirational domestic politicians and their most resonant international statesmen of the post-colonial period....as well as of two of the most fanatical cricket-loving leaders."

But the last word is from the Jamaican cartoonist, Clovis. He shows Michael Manley and Cheddi Jagan, both having just passed through the Pearly Gates of Heaven looking mischievously angelic, and Michael is saying "Cheddi, are you thinking what I'm thinking? Let's REFORM this place!"

One Love Michael. One Love Cheddi.

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