

**SIR HAROLD ST. JOHN MEMORIAL LECTURE
CHURCH HALL, CHRIST CHURCH PARISH CHURCH
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1, 2015 AT 7:30 PM**

**SIR HAROLD ST. JOHN AND THE PHENOMENON OF THE OISTINS FISH FESTIVAL:
PUTTING THE CASE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The title of this evening's discourse is expressed in three inter-related themes. I have undertaken firstly, to reflect on the political life of Sir Harold St. John, secondly, on the phenomenon of the Oistins Fish Festival, and thirdly, I propose to derive from Sir Harold's legacy and from the example of the Oistins Fish Festival to put the case for local government in Barbados.

It is immediately obvious why I would inter-relate the experience of Sir Harold St. John and the phenomenon of the Oistins Fish Festival due to his intimate connection to the event, of which his wife, Lady St. John, is the founder. What is perhaps less obvious is the relationship between Sir Harold and the Festival, on the one hand, and the case for local government, on the other hand.

I begin by telling you that my thesis is that the Oistins Fish Festival offers a prescription for local government as an example of people in a local community expressing the social virtues of self-sufficiency, self-empowerment and self-determination. I suggest to you that these are among the required virtues in a local community that claims readiness to order its affairs at the local level.

I realize however that I am likely to collide with views that conceive local government as yet another tier of political administration that is excessively bureaucratic, and therefore problematic, expensive and divisive and therefore ultimately counter-productive of genuine social progress.

I dare to tell you that my prescription for local government is designed to avoid the negative features of national government since we do not wish to introduce another level of government that repeats the weaknesses of national government.

I begin with the admission that the themes are incomplete unless I also acknowledge the presence and involvement of Lady Stella St. John, since I suspect that this nature of cultural involvement would not have been as easy for Sir Harold St. John if he had not done so in the company of his worthy wife.

We know Sir Harold as a political figure and we recognize the Oistins Fish Festival as a cultural phenomenon. I seek consistency with that theme in suggesting that any genuine attempt at the political establishment of local government must also be rooted organically in the culture of a people before it finds outgrowth into manifestoes and mandates for the self-sufficiency, self-empowerment and self-determination of a local community.

You will therefore find that Sir Harold and Lady St. John were able to join their respective political and cultural pursuits in a symbiotic way and that this union of politics and culture ultimately transformed an entire community. What is more significant is that those we call the ordinary folk were at the centre of this transformative process.

It remains an enduring weakness of our cultural, social and economic life that our destinies remain tied to the discretions of a central government. We therefore continue to complain to our Parliamentary representatives about the non-existence of road repairs and of garbage collection services within our local communities. I speak therefore to the virtues of authentic local government as a vehicle to ameliorate these problems and to elevate these communities for the sake of local and national development.

If Sir Harold has been the political hero of Oistins and Christ Church, how blessed has been this parish that he became married to a cultural icon of a region. Indeed, it has been an actual and symbolic union of politics and culture that procreated the development of this important region of Barbados in which Bankers, Fisherfolk, Pharmacists, Itinerant food Vendors, Doctors, and Merchants occupy the same stretch of landscape with equal dignity and equal entitlement. Yet, this physical development has not compromised the natural beauty of the area.

The more fundamental point therefore is that the founders of this Festival must be seen to have been transfiguring the event into a larger organized community, holistically embracing the institutions of commerce and culture in the broadest sense. In other words, I suggest to you that the phenomenon of the Oistins Fish Festival provides many facets of the blue-print for local governance.

More than the other local festivals in Barbados, the Oistins Fish Festival has spawned permanent and enduring social, economic and cultural development in its local area.

It has opened new vistas into an old town and has breathed new cultural and commercial realities and possibilities into a landscape that has transformed into a beacon for those who look on, and an oasis for those who live, work and recreate there. I want to suggest to you that Oistins is not an accident. If the new Oistins was once a dream, it is now a reality that serves as a commercial and cultural model for the other regions of Barbados where these possibilities also exist.

Sir Harold, Lady St. John and the Committees of the Oistins Fish Festival must shine their lights from behind the bushels of modesty and take immense credit for this new Oistins.

By the work of these patriots, Oistins has become what Bridgetown is striving to be once more, what Speightstown has lost, what Holetown does not wish to be, and what Warrens is unlikely to become unless it emerges from its culturally arid and barren commercial landscape.

As a new phenomenon, I want to briefly focus with particular interest on Warrens. Since our architecture must always be related to our concepts of development, I find Warrens particularly interesting as a completely modern entity whose physical design has been entirely within the control of our modern town planners.

When the buzz of vehicles subside at 6pm, when the pillars of concrete and glass have expelled their daytime occupants, when their only companion is a stoic security guard, the commercial centre of Warrens will never have implanted itself culturally within its community.

I suggest to you that Warrens may be losing that opportunity to organically implant itself into its local community with the rejection by the incumbent government of the traffic 'fly-overs'.

Here was an opportunity to re-create this impersonal zone into a landscape of more meaningful social, commercial and cultural intercourse. It was an architectural intervention that could have facilitated the transformation of its social spaces at ground level into a more hospitable environment. Too much of its landscape is interrupted by the violence of a highway.

The 'fly-overs' could have facilitated larger numbers of slow-moving vehicles into the zone at ground level, while re-designing parking areas, pedestrian concourses and recreational spaces to offer greater human comforts and greater benefits to the businesses in the area.

I charge this government with having rejected this infrastructure out of its characteristic fear of attainable possibilities. The 'fly-overs' would have merely distributed hazardous by-passing vehicles into harmless zones of passage. Instead, the government widened the roads and increased the areas of hazard to pedestrians. Warrens has therefore become a commercial centre of lonely buildings, impatient vehicles and the occasional distressed pedestrian.

But let us speak of Oistins, for the job so well begun is yet unfinished! I wonder what idea Sir Harold himself would have envisioned for the management of vehicular traffic into and around this important cultural and commercial hub of Oistins and its greater environs. For I do think that the project is unfinished and we must join our creative intellectual energies according to the example that Sir Harold has left us.

Permit me, however, at this juncture to reflect on this union of politics and culture that has made this Oistins Fish Festival event possible, and made this Oistins the phenomenon that it is. By now you are aware that I am attributing to Sir Harold and Lady St. John and the various Committees of the Oistins Fish Festival, much of the credit for the cultural and commercial success that Oistins has become.

Meantime, I crave your indulgence as I briefly reflect on salient aspects of the political journey of Sir Harold. As Sir Grantley Adams' heir apparent, it was not surprising that the young Bernard St. John's was one of the stellar performances of the 1966 election. Before the 1971 election the governing DLP must have adopted the cricketing tactic of brutalizing the opposing captain, even at the expense of truth!

By 1971, the DLP strategy became that of exploiting the characteristic shyness of the BLP leader, Mr. Bernard St. John, to propagandize into the minds of the electorate that he was distant from people.

Historically coincident with this travesty was the emergence of the radio programme, 'The Brathwaites Of Black Rock', written by the creative intellect of a young Mrs. Stella St. John. This serialized radio show celebrated the lives of the ordinary Barbadian with dignity and with humour. Too many of our writers have not found it possible to combine dignity with humour.

And while the opponent was speaking untruthfully of Mr. St. John, Elombe Mottley, in his recently published volumes, 'Better Must Come', reminds us that this able lawyer was fighting the cause of the consumers against the telephone company's proposed rate increases with admirable competence and for free!

In spite of all this, the DLP strategy succeeded and the Party lost badly and Mr. St. John lost his seat. This political injustice would have hastened the early and frustrated retirement of lesser men. The distance between 1971 and 1976 must have seemed long.

Here demonstrated in the lives of our two protagonists, if you wish, was that union of politics and culture persevering against adversity.

By 1976, the early winds of political change were evident and the Oistins Fish Festival would be in its stage of conception. Again, we witness the harmonious co-existence of the politics and the culture and a sense that the union is on the threshold of great achievement.

September would come, and more precisely, September 2nd, 1976 did come! I describe this victorious event and this ensuing chapter in Sir Harold's political life in one word- Redemption! By Easter of 1977 the Oistins Fish Festival would finally be born!

That union of culture and politics that had endured in adversity would thrive in political office, not to build personal empires, but to gradually re-build Oistins into the cultural epicenter of a parish and a commercial centre of national significance. As we asserted earlier, the ordinary folk of Christ Church and Oistins would be at the centre of this cultural and commercial development.

The real evidence of the dignified status accorded to the ordinary folk within the commercial centre is revealed in their location in the Oistins Bay Garden. This 'Oistins Bay Garden' occupies prime beach-front real estate that must be the envy of developers who normally covet these spaces for exclusive occupation. Not Oistins! Not under Sir Harold's watch! The Bay Garden has become a most wholesome expression of social intercourse in which tourism integrates itself with the local population in ways that dignify and commercially advance the lives of ordinary people.

As I alluded earlier, along this stretch of landscape caressed by the placid waters on a beautiful beach, you can do business at your laundry, your supermarket, your bank, your pharmacist, your hair-dresser, your fish vendor, fill up the car at your gas station, you can stop for lunch or dinner, and, these days, you can attend to that most vital piece of equipment of modern life, you can "top-up" your mobile phone!

And if we change all this we will hurt Oistins. That social admixture is what makes Oistins the experience that it has become, not by accident, but by the design of these visionaries.

Sir Harold and Lady St. John, we salute you and we honour you, not with gifts of gold, but with gratitude that you have bequeathed a legacy that now reaches beyond a festival and has reached into the lives of the ordinary folk and has facilitated their extraordinary achievements.

And so it was with a supreme confidence that Sir Harold and Lady Stella St. John invested in the self-sufficiency of those other founders of this festival, thereby empowering the Committee towards a determination that its members could build something enduring of this annual event.

Having identified the three ingredients of self-sufficiency, self-empowerment and self-determination, we discover that they exist in the spirit and the will of a community. Having thrived unto this 39th year of its occurrence, I commend that spirit and that will as a prescription for local government in Barbados in which we establish permanent structures managed by those who live and work within these local communities.

My broad proposal is that the local community must have a substantial input into the efficient delivery of services and that these amenities ought to be rationally provided, subject to the administration of the local community. I think immediately of the utility services (water, gas, electricity, telephone), postal services, sanitation services, road repair programmes, general social assistance, and sports and recreational activities. I suggest that these are all matters within the competent grasp of Councils of citizens at the local level.

This lecture would be deficient if it did not address the incumbent government's attempt at local government crafted and drafted in the legislation known as the Constituency Councils Act. To the unsuspecting, who support a regime of local government, this Act has been a terrible disappointment. The kindest word that I have located to describe the legislation is, 'cynical'.

The Act has defeated a cardinal feature of representative government that stipulates that the represented must choose the representative. Under this scheme of local government, a single Minister chooses the representatives for the entire island. One expects, however, that the party's representative (with or without a parliamentary seat) in each constituency has a say in deciding who sits on each council and so the scheme remains entirely under the control of the government and the party in office.

At inception, the Constituency Council becomes a representative arm of the government and of the political party in office. Rather than welding a local community together, the scheme is born in partisan domination and political polarization. As the saying goes, "it's all downhill from there!"

Struggling to locate its true identity, or more accurately, to disguise its true identity, the legislation vaguely states that the purpose of each Council is to "a) improve the delivery of social services to constituents; and b) effectively and efficiently assist in the management of resources assigned for the development of each constituency within a framework of good governance."

Whatever that means it can mean almost anything and I am sure that, on the face of it, it is not promising to do anything that is not already within the mandate of the relevant agencies of State.

Not much later, the Constituency Councils Act reveals its insidiously dangerous content. It permits the Council to raise monies from private sources. The recent revelations in parts of the financial community reveal this to be a statutory provision of sinister dimension. It becomes a form of institutionalized corruption when the State legitimizes the mixing of public and private finances into a pool of resources that may influence the way in which people vote. This is not local government. This is local mischief!

The Councils have therefore failed to impress that they are any more than what they are- organs of a ruling party intended to perpetuate the interest of the party rather than to genuinely empower the citizens in any real way. Apart from the occasional public relations exercises claiming organization of social activities, it seems that the real work has taken place beneath the gaze of public scrutiny.

The legislation inheres with contempt for local communities in that it fails to extend itself beyond a few sections and pages of a flimsy Act of Parliament. It empowers the party and alienates the citizen from any genuine participation in the administration of his local community.

I feel strongly that the Constituency Councils Act is undemocratic, abusive of the sacred principles of governance and wholly immoral. I urge a new government to

abolish the legislation and to consider a regime of local government that is genuinely respectful of local participation in the process of governance.

I therefore suggest that any proposal for local government ought to be characterized by the following features:-

1. In its formal structure, membership should not be based on partisan political affiliation. In other words, you do not seek membership on the Council as a member of a political party. Apart from those individuals elected democratically by the local community, the others should serve by virtue of offices held on behalf of the State within the geographical area of the Council. For example, the Post Master General's nominee, the Chief Welfare Officer's nominee, the nominee of the Commissioner of Police, School Principals, Church leaders, and so on. All churches within the geographical community should be centrally involved in the organization of the election of council members.
2. Local government entities ought to be based on parish identities and not on constituency identities. In other words, there ought to be Parish Councils and not Constituency Councils. Parish borders have tended to be permanent while constituency borders have changed from time to time. In addition, a constituency identity imbues the council with features of partisanship that may be inimical to its harmonious existence.
3. In order to avoid the creation of another muscle-bound bureaucratic tier of government, the Parish Council ought to be advisory as opposed to executive.
4. A limited budget should be provided only for sports and cultural activities while the national government should continue to fund the usual infrastructural and social welfare programmes as advised by the Council.

5. The Parliamentary representatives in the parish should sit on the Parish Council. Where there is an over-lap he or she would sit on both Councils.

The whole purpose will be to maintain genuine and pure representation by local citizens and State agency representatives on the Councils while retaining a non-partisan character, except for the presence of the Parliamentary representative.

As far as possible, the aim will be to de-politicise the activities of the Councils, to emphasize rationalization in the delivery of social services and amenities and to create spaces that conduce to social living. In short, I think that local government ought to be of the character of a social administration rather than a political administration.

The result ought to be the strengthening of local communities, having imbued them with a sense of collective responsibility for resolving local matters.

Before the implementation of local government there ought to be a democratic consultative process that gives to citizens the opportunity to openly say what they think ought to be the structure of these bodies.

Amidst all of this, the good Parliamentary representative will never find himself distant from his local community and from the local Council.

I am reminded that Sir Harold was fondly nick-named the 'Baron of Oistins' for the special and particular attention that he gave to this, his beloved area of the Barbadian landscape. I am told that he jealously guarded its development against proposals that he felt capable of alienating the free and equal participation of the folk of Oistins.

A boat owner recently told me that there had been a proposal to fence in the boatyard at Oistins. He understood that Sir Harold had felt that the area should remain open and that he therefore opposed the proposal.

He did not tell me what had been Sir Harold's reasoning, but it is clear to me that the aesthetic appeal of the boatyard along the main road of Oistins would have been lost by this separation of the ancient craft of boat-building behind unnecessary barricades. The boatyard is an organic feature and perhaps the central feature of this historic town and you could not defend the heritage of the area by creating social distances. The boat-builder and the rest of his community must feel that they are equally involved in each other's business and that there should be no separation of their mutual labours.

Together with his intimate attention to this humble landscape, Sir Harold would for 10 years marry with that local governance an outstanding sojourn in national government.

I may have told you in another place that it is my view that while Prime Minister Adams gained attention as the face and the voice of that period of creative management of Barbados' affairs, the concealed and vigorous intellect that was crafting much of the further modernization of this country's institutions and infrastructure was Sir Harold's. Indeed, Sir Harold would be described by a young Owen Arthur as "the bedrock of policy transformation in the BLP government."

My own recollection of Sir Harold during that period was of a frequently spoken commitment to air travel within the Caribbean. He expressed his business-like commitment to regionalism, not in flowery rhetoric and vacuous platitudes, but he often advocated that the fortunes of Caribbean people were much bound up in intra-regional trade and intra-regional travel. He clearly understood that no useful conversation on intra-regional trade could be conducted unless you also spoke of sustaining intra-regional travel. We could not help witnessing his matter-of-fact attention to regional integration and we left with a recognition that this region will not progress under it progresses in unified effort.

Were he alive today, Sir Harold would lament upon the xenophobia that seems to influence governmental policy and the reputation of this country within the region. There was no good reason for the Shanique Myrie issue to have been litigated. Nevertheless, there was a point at which 'Myrie' ceased to be about individual grievances and became one of national agitations. It is a blot on regional relationships that we are expensively litigating petty differences when we should be engaged in negotiating regional unities. The Government of Barbados exercised poor judgment and lost more than a case. Barbados lost its moral and political authority as a leader in the regional cause and even if the outcome of the case were different, this country would still have been the loser. There was no prospect of victory either way.

Amidst the hurly-burly and the tides in the affairs of humankind, there is this facet of the human called character. That thing that is at once a valued collection of integrity, faith, fortitude, courage, selflessness, industry, endurance, and, in the words of the Jazz musician John Coltrane, a "love supreme" for the physical and meta-physical world in which you claim belonging.

Behind that personality trait of shyness resided a man whose relationship with his people defined character! He quietly stood for and by them when perhaps even they did not know, and he remained loyal to family, friend, party and country and may have done it in no other way.

He had a sharp appreciation for merit, being himself immensely blessed with that virtue. It was not by any gift of privilege that he was reputed to be one of Barbados' leading lawyers. He was indeed among Barbados' pre-eminent legal minds.

I want to speak to you separately of Sir Harold's respect for merit. He knew that merit did not come in a package, but that, as with himself, merit was packaged in character.

As I reflect on these next few sentences, I do so in solemn deliberation. We do not know by which event, which word, which deed, nor even by which idea we will forever be judged by our fellow man. From my humble perspective, I commend to

you, merely a fleeting moment by which the man Sir Harold St. John revealed his depth of character.

I want to correct myself if I described it as a fleeting moment. Perhaps it was a moment frozen in time, a moment in which those around him came face to face with true character and then they came face to face with themselves.

I want to tell you what I was told about the events that unfolded at the Barbados Labour Party Headquarters just prior to the general election of 1986 when the then shadow Minister of Finance, Richard Haynes, later Sir Richard, had presented his budget reply in which he had promised Barbadians generous tax relief.

Sir Harold, as Prime Minister, had cautioned the country against tax relief that was too liberal since he felt that it was ruinous of the economy.

It seemed that the BLP Parliamentarians were receiving word that the public was going to be swayed by the blandishments of Mr. Haynes' proposals. There was a consequential clamour for Sir Harold to out-do Mr. Haynes and to reverse his position on the issue of tax relief in the hope that he would also reverse the party's declining popularity and therefore win the pending election.

Amidst the paroxysmal excitement and the general clamour that anticipated Sir Harold's acceptance of his colleagues' new proposal, the Prime Minister spoke in historic language. A young Owen Arthur recalls his leader's words thus, "If you want me to back-raise Richie Haynes and put the country in financial peril, please take the cup of leadership from my lips."

Here was a Prime Minister offering to sacrifice himself and his leadership for the sake of truth and for the sake of his country.

The room suddenly reduced to silence. It was a silence that brought that esteemed gathering face to face with itself within that frozen moment of time. This gentleman, in whose honour we gather tonight, refused to barter the country's prospects for the sake of an election victory.

How do you then begin to comprehend the man? At that moment he is no longer a politician, nor the gladiator that a politician is supposed to be. In that moment,

is he reduced, or is he augmented? Was there in that room a voice that was louder than the Prime Minister's? If there was, that night there was no voice that spoke more honourably than Sir Harold's!

That night a party found itself once again and a room filled itself with the simple, virtuous honesty of Sir Harold Bernard St. John and purest honour converged gently upon him.

This patriot was not prepared to sacrifice truth and the state of the country for the spoils of an election victory, for he must have felt that the people's business was not about trickery. The phrase, 'country before self' had never encountered more profound and honest meaning.

Yet, as they feared, the Barbados Labour Party was stabbed and grievously wounded by the opponent in the ensuing general election, but because of Sir Harold's character, the Party never lost a drop of its honest blood. Long may his spirit live! Long may his Barbados Labour Party live!

Our economic historians will truthfully record that this country came to the brink of financial disaster during that period of government. Together with the national trauma of the economic ruin that Sir Harold had predicted, the party in office suffered major political implosions as it gradually dismantled, firstly with the formation of a third party from among its Parliamentary ranks in its first term, and then with an internal Parliamentary rebellion until it limped out of office in the second term well within the constitutional time limits.

If 1976 to 1986 was his redemption, 1986 to 1994 became his vindication and Sir Harold would once again return in 1994 as the revered and senior Statesman of this country's public affairs. The new Prime Minister, Owen Arthur's estimation was that, Sir Harold brought a sense of stability and seriousness of purpose to the success of that young government.

As the youngest Minister in the Owen Arthur Government, Mia Mottley would speak with fond remembrance of Sir Harold's frequent exhortations to read. Having the privilege of occupying the seat in Parliament next to him, The Party Leader certainly credits this gentleman with having fostered her love for policy

and for representation of people. Distilling the plethora of compliments from Miss Mottley, it was the word 'genius' that was central in her tribute to this Titan of the Barbados Labour Party.

The Guyanese poet, Martin Carter, would probably describe Sir Harold's satisfaction of living the rest of his life under the competent government of his beloved Barbados Labour Party as "resolution of the purpose".

Permit me, therefore, to capture the voyage of his political life in the language of 'promise' (1966 – 1971), 'injustice' (1971 - 1976), 'redemption' (1976 – 1986), 'vindication' (1986 – 1994), and 'resolution' (1994 – 2004). Friends, you will not meet a more outstanding example of a political life of personal sacrifice, yet joined with greatest personal achievement. You now have the evidence that it was that virtue of selflessness within his character that would cause him to rank the country's success above his personal political fortunes.

There are former and present Parliamentarians on both sides whose political biographies are now considerably enhanced for having shared time in a Parliament with Sir Harold St. John.

Character is the subject of my story and government in this country must always be populated by politicians of character, men and women of merit who will embrace truth and decency and honesty in their public life and lead this country "o'er the world's tempestuous seas".

The political lie must be exposed for the savage danger that it presents to the citizens of this country. As Marcus Brutus declared to Lucilius, "There are no tricks in plain and simple faith." Men like Sir Harold teach us that our fidelity to country can be plain and simple and, above all, honest.

To the east of this building is a large monument that commemorates the life of this patriot. Yet, as a testament to the man, it is still a modest tribute. To the south of this building is an even greater gift from Sir Harold and Lady St. John and this Committee to the people of Barbados. When we go from this place tonight and we see the lights of Oistins and all of Christ Church South and all of Christ Church, we discover that this thriving landscape is a more generous

commemoration of this symbolic union of politics and culture, of culture and politics.

At dawn, those lights will extinguish, but in our hearts the light of gratitude will forever illuminate knowing that Sir Harold did all that he did “in a general honest thought”.

And so when in our daily travels, we pass by the headstone that marks his place of physical burial, perhaps one day Christ Church will find the time to pause and say, paraphrasing Marcus Brutus, that “this parish and this country owe more tears to this dead man than you shall see us pay”. Long may his memory yet live!

And perhaps even then Christ Church shall recognize that the journey of this Festival is the unfinished journey of Sir Harold and Lady St. John and that the lights must never be extinguished upon this Festival and upon this Oistins and upon this Christ Church South and upon this Christ Church, for in a very paradoxical way legacies inherited are also debts owed to future generations and it is our duty to pay to those yet unborn.

Tonight, we have come to do honour to Sir Harold St. John, and I commend to all, his legacy. I treasure the presence of Lady St. John and I congratulate the Committee of the Oistins Fish Festival for its 39th devotion to annual duty and I urge the citizens of this country to sit at the feet of this finest example of local community effort and to build across this land and in every parish strong institutions of self-sufficiency, self-empowerment and self-determination.

There is an African proverb that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” Having gone this far, there is no doubt that you have gone together, and I want to honour the legacy of Sir Harold Bernard St. John and go together with you.

I am obliged to you.

Ralph Thorne, QC