



## Honourable Keith Johnson, OJ, CD

Mr Chancellor: One of the tests of statecraft is the ability of the state to choose its emissaries well. As Shakespeare put it, "Alas! how should you govern any kingdom, / That know not how to use ambassadors." Chancellor, I present the quintessential emissary, the Dean of diplomats, Ambassador the Honourable Keith Johnson, Member of the Order of Jamaica, Commander of the Order of Distinction, lately Jamaica's Ambassador to the United States of America.

His career as diplomat began well before he formally assumed such a position. He was an ambassador by aptitude, by his concern for people, and by his love of service. Between 1949 and 1962, he worked in the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. There, in the UN Secretariat, he grew in a climate of diplomacy. More importantly, he acquired a reputation as an unofficial ambassador, working for the benefit not only of the Jamaican community in the New York area, but for the wider West Indian community as well. He served nearly all the Chief Ministers of the English-speaking Caribbean. And he did this, he says, "just as a hobby."

Small wonder, then, that he was invited home as a special guest of the Jamaican Government on the occasion of Jamaica's Independence in 1962. It was a measure of the man that the Government that invited him was a new Government, and he had been doing his voluntary work of goodwill for another political directorate. At the airport, he was welcomed by the Deputy Prime Minister, who, to Johnson's surprise, congratulated him on his appointment as the new nation's first Consul General in New York.

**He had no second thoughts about accepting. His hobby had become his vocation. What is more, his familiarity with the corridors of the UN Secretariat was an advantage in his new job. During his five years as Consul General, he also served as Jamaica's representative on the UN's Third Committee, which dealt with social, cultural and humanitarian affairs.**

In 1967, continuing on a natural line of progression, he was appointed Jamaica's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations. He also became non-resident Ambassador to Argentina. In 1973, we find him in Bonn, as Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, and non-resident Ambassador to the Netherlands, to Luxembourg, to the State of Israel, and to the Vatican. In 1981, he recrossed the Atlantic, to become Ambassador to the United States of America, and Permanent Representative of Jamaica to the Organisation of American States, positions which he held until he retired ten years later. He was also non-resident High Commissioner to the Bahamas. During the almost thirty years of his diplomatic career, Governments at home had changed and changed again. **Keith Johnson remained, their impeccable and trusted representative abroad.**

Highlights of his achievement as Ambassador to the United Nations include chairmanship of the Fourth Committee, which had to do with the decolonisation process that was taking place across the globe. In 1972, he successfully negotiated the participation of the People's Republic of China in the Stockholm Conference on the Environment, a participation which marked China's return to UN membership. He secured for Jamaica the Vice-Presidency of the 26th Session of the General Assembly, and served in that capacity. In Germany, he was principal Third World spokesman on North-South issues. He preserved for Jamaica a high level of technical cooperation with successive Dutch governments, and engineered a significant flow of Dutch and German tourists to Jamaica. In Washington, he played a major role in securing tax exempt status for US organisations holding conventions in Jamaica. He was a key player in negotiations relating to the Caribbean Basin Initiative and the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative. Since retiring he has continued to serve, as an international consultant – with the OAS in Haiti, and more recently with the United Nations Environmental Programme.

In all of this, Chancellor, it will satisfy your West Indian appetite to know that Keith Johnson took particular pleasure in doing whatever he could for the West Indies as a whole. We have already noted some of his early work in this regard. In those days too, he was elected for four consecutive terms as President of the West Indian Students Association in New York. He was unofficial adviser to Sir John Mordecai, Deputy Governor General of the Federal Government, on West Indian Students Affairs, and on the setting up of a Foreign Service for the Federation. In the early days of West Indian representation in the United Nations, he threw himself into the effort to get the English-speaking Caribbean recognised as part of the Latin American region. As he puts it, "I had to draw down Simon Bolivar's Kingston letter on their heads – to show that we are a part of this Latin American business."

If you ask Keith Johnson where he got his training in the art of diplomacy, he will say, "To tell you the truth, I had to find my way." And what was his way? His was an art of knowing who to reach in order to reach the one whom you really needed to reach. One of his protégés speaks admiringly of the wide sweep of his contacts across decades and across the social spectrum. And if the instinct for good contacts was a virtue, keeping in touch was no less so. As another protégé has said: "At Christmas time, sending out cards for Ambassador Johnson was a massive operation." What is more, he signed every card himself, and often scribbled a note. As his wife – one of our most distinguished alumni – will emphasise, he is a great family man; and his family extends far beyond the reach of blood. He is godfather to any number of children. He is by training a demographer, but a demographer to whom people are always persons, not mere statistics.

An ambassador with a gentle, caring heart, but of iron integrity and principle, he lives by a rule from cricket: "If you pitch the ball right down the middle, you can't go wrong." Loyal in friendship, he inspires loyalty in others. A man of infinite tact, he never parades his connections. If he knew when to seize opportunity, he also knew when to defer, when to decline. Distinguished by his taste and elegance, he puts people at ease in the glow of calm authority that attends him. He embodies presence without pomp. The ladies extol his prowess as a dancer, a gift most useful in ambassadors. On a famous Washington occasion, finding a preponderance of women at the ball, he made sure that none of them went away feeling neglected. He danced all night. Next morning, the chauffeurs in the diplomatic parking lot were tipping their caps to him even more deferentially than usual.

When he retired in 1991, President George Bush sent him a formal letter of good wishes. But the formal letter, which began "Dear Mr Ambassador," was accompanied by a personal one, in the President's own hand. It began: "Dear Keith, / What a job you've done for your country." What finer praise could any Ambassador desire? Like the noble Moor, Othello, Keith Johnson can say, "I have done the state some service, and they know it." We expect, that when he comes to present his credentials in the courts of Heaven, the King will say: "Well done, good and faithful servant; your reputation has preceded you. I hear that Rex Nettleford has called you a prince of the realm. He was right." Chancellor, you will do us great service by conferring on Keith Meredith Johnson, Ambassador at large and extraordinary, the degree of Doctor of Laws of the University of the West Indies, *honoris causa*.

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