



Noor Mohamed Hassanali

Mr. Chancellor,

It is entirely appropriate in these troublous times that we seek to honour one of our leading exemplars — a Head of State — whose character is the very antithesis of the contemporary mood. Indeed, curious in its irony, he embodies the baffling phenomenon of the modest, self-effacing personality whose influence is yet profound and powerful.

I present His Excellency Noor Mohamed Hassanali, President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Barrister-at-Law, former Judge of the High Court and Justice of Appeal of the Supreme Court, sportsman and community worker.

Of humble origin, Noor Hassanali was born in 1918, the son of a cane farmer, in Victoria Village, at that time a group of rudimentary houses squatting like an oasis in the cane-green desert of Naparima. Life there in the 1920's was typical of a settled East Indian community in the sugar belt. His family, large, closely-knit, God-fearing in the Muslim faith, and living according to tradition, moved to the deadening rhythms of sugar. Amenities were few, transport primitive, and there was neither running water nor electricity. Children were expected to take part in day-to-day chores such as tending to the livestock and to the family plot and fetching water from distant places. Canadian Mission Schools of the Presbyterian faith at Canaan and Corinth offered a primary education but although, we are told, the young Hassanali was indeed the 'whining schoolboy with his satchel and shining morning face', he dared not, for fear of incurring the wrath of parents and teachers alike, 'creep unwillingly to school' since his destination happened to be four miles away, a journey he was obliged to negotiate twice daily on foot without the benefit of shoes! But he prospered.

Outstanding in his studies and sports alike, he was the envy of his companions. Indeed his preoccupation with sport caused such concern to his father that he was summarily accused of paying more attention to his feet than to his head. He reflects with deep nostalgia on these formative years, for his experiences then were to be the determinants of his developing personality. 'Family', he says, 'is the training ground for love and service to humanity, it is where one develops and broadens the sense of service to others; an individual learns to have a sense of his own obligations and responsibilities, to have consideration for his neighbour and respect for the rights of others'.

Proceeding to Naparima College he progressed steadily to the sixth form and in 1937 gained the Higher School Certificate in the Language Group. Ever an all-rounder, he also represented the College at football and cricket, earning for himself the accolade of best all-round student of that year. Encouraged at home at an early age — he read accounts of court cases to his father — his mind had already focussed on Law as a career. To this end he decided to augment family finances, before proceeding abroad, by accepting a temporary appointment on the staff of Naparima College. Much to his disappointment, World War 11 intervened, forcing him to continue in this post for five years. His services as French teacher, Sports Master and Residence Master, however, were carried out with such enthusiasm and success that his Principal took for granted that he would forsake the Law for a career as a teacher. Meanwhile, on the field of soccer, his game matured as a member of the Spitfire football team. Of slight stature, he confounded conventional wisdom by excelling as a centre-half, a position normally reserved for bigger players, to the extent that he

was selected to represent the Southern Amateur Football Association in the island-wide inter-league competition.

But the opportunity to study law finally arrived in 1943, and he moved to Canada to the University of Toronto where he graduated with honours in 1947. Campus life offered new and exciting horizons and with characteristic calm vigour, he threw himself fully into its activities. Academic accomplishments apart, he continued to exploit his talents as a sportsman and emerging aptitude for leadership. He captained and coached the First Division Soccer team of his College and represented the University in championship competition, earning for himself, in 1947, the highest athletic award of the University, the Bronze T. He also was President of the Victoria College Hall of Residence, Member of the Residence Council and Member of the Executive Council of the College Athletic Union. But this was not all. This period of apparently care-free apprenticeship saw him think more deeply about his impending career. The role of the judge as disinterested arbiter of justice in the practice of Law held a particular fascination for him, so that he sought after and won an appointment as Chief Justice of the Moot Court of the University Law School. Yielding to another compelling inclination, that of community service, he found himself, during the summer vacations, administering to the needs of underprivileged children in a Rotary Camp as Division Leader. He had achieved the highest standards and was in every respect a model undergraduate.

His departure for England to complete his training as a lawyer marked the beginning of a new phase of his career. He was called to the Bar at Gray's Inn in 1948 and immediately returned to Trinidad.

Seemingly everything was in place for the development of a lucrative practice and he persevered to this end for five years with considerable success. Yet he was not entirely settled. He saw, of course, the wisdom of that famous dictum attributed to Samuel Johnson:

. . . A lawyer has no business with the justice or injustice of the cause which he undertakes, unless the client asks his opinion, and then he is bound to give it honestly. The justice or injustice of a cause is to be decided by the judge . . .

but noted that implicit in these sentiments is the injunction that under certain circumstances a lawyer is obliged to be indifferent to injustice. It was a sticking point. Moreover, he admitted to some discomfort with the imperative of a practising advocate, that of having to charge professional fees in accord with the extent and quality of his services. It was a dilemma not easily resolved. He even allowed himself a brief flirtation with politics when he was persuaded beyond his better judgement to stand for the elections of 1950. But his heart was not in the hustings; he placed third to Sinanan and Seukeran and it became clear that the special attributes required of the successful politician were alien to his temperament. So he followed the dictates of his conscience and accepted a post of Magistrate, even if this meant adjusting to the relatively modest rewards of this public office. By this time, too, he had married Zalayhar Mohammed a teacher at a Siparia school, a charming and gifted personality in her own right, whose support and activities over the ensuing years were destined to provide the perfect complement to those of her husband.

Noor Hassanali served with distinction as Magistrate in Victoria, Tobago, St. Patrick and St. George, experiences which enabled him to plumb the depths of the feelings, emotions and frailties of the differing groups which comprise the nation's conglomerate. In 1960, he was appointed Senior Magistrate but later that very year succeeded to the post of Senior Crown Counsel. Five years on, he was promoted to Assistant Solicitor General and a further year saw him elevated to the Bench. Here at last was the fulfilment of his life's ambition and he embraced it with enthusiasm. He served as Judge of the High Court for twelve years and then, from 1978, as Justice of the Court of Appeal until his retirement in 1984. In these capacities he was known for his honesty, fairness, infinite patience and deep knowledge and understanding of the Law. His written judgements, always completed within reasonable time, were models of clarity.

There are other dimensions to his remarkable career, principally in voluntary community service, encompassing a wide and varied range of activities, from the Red Cross to the Scouting movement to Sport and to Education. After retirement, he lectured on Criminal Procedure at the Hugh Wooding Law School and was the leading force in establishing the Moot Court which he served for two years as Master.

When he was invited to be President in 1987, the news was received with universal acclaim. Here was a distinguished son of the soil, of the highest moral fibre, whose attributes, qualities, knowledge and experience fitted perfectly the requirements of this high office, at this particular time. Typically, his perception of his role reflects the sum of his wisdom in promoting tolerance among the various strands of the multi-racial society of Trinidad and Tobago, which is: to influence legitimately in a way that will redound to the benefit and well-being of society but not to interfere where it is not in his province to do so.

Noor Hassanali has served and continues to serve as well with wisdom and the mystic power that flows

from an honest and dignified personality. He has chosen to walk humbly, to be tender of heart, to meet his fellow-men with kindness and to mix with them as a friend.

*. . . Still in thy right hand carry gentle peace,
To silence envious tongues: be just and fear not.
Let all the ends thou aims't at be thy country's
Thy God's and truth's . . .*

This, then, is the measure of the man. He stands firm and strong as a symbol of national unity and we wish now to embrace him and make him one of us.

I request you, Mr. Chancellor, by the authority of Senate and Council, to admit His Excellency, Noor Hassanali to the Degree of Doctor of Laws, Honoris Causa.