



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

John Maxwell

Chancellor, I invoke from the outset that old Roman warning 'caveat emptor' - buyer beware - to signal the notion that the graduand we are about to honour is no ordinary honouree. Indeed, we might reasonably propose that in his lifetime he has been dismissed from his substantive posts on numerous occasions, lost decisively the one electoral seat he sought to contest and has been reviled as often as he has been praised for his various utterances and works. This, one could argue, is the curriculum vitae of a fool, or on the contrary, a visionary. Very few Chancellor, would accuse John Maxwell of occupying the former station.

Born in Duncan's, Trelawny in 1934, son of the Reverend John William Maxwell and his wife Zelma, John the younger grew up in the very house built for the anti-slavery Baptist Minister William Knibb after the original had been burnt to the ground by anti abolitionist planter interests. This, the superstitious might suggest, was a portent of his life to come; or perhaps he was shaped by his father's political career as the first black member of the Legislative Council; or perhaps it was John's own feisty persona, evident in the numerous fights that he recalls from childhood through Calabar High School and on to Jamaica College, usually in defence of John's right to be John. Whatever the scribes might conclude, by the time the young Maxwell was employed by the legendary Theodore Sealy to be the shipping reporter at the *Gleaner* in 1952, he was already well on the way to becoming the advocate who is still recognisable today - a spirited defender of the weak against the strong, of the wretched and voiceless against those with voice and franchise. The litany of his career since then is the stuff of local journalistic legend. Political reporter at *Public Opinion* from 1954-1956, he was also co-founder and General Secretary of the Jamaica Union of Journalists. A short stint at the Jamaica Industrial Development Corporation punctuated his return to *Public Opinion* and then on to *Newsday* magazine as associate editor. In 1959 Maxwell made the transition to the new and

exciting electronic media world of the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation where he worked until 1962, when, falling afoul of the newly elected government, he was dismissed and returned to *Public Opinion*. This, however, was not a safe haven and after further altercations with the government, he left in 1966 for London, where he joined the BBC, becoming the first non-white editor in the newsroom.

Success in the UK never dulled the call of home. In 1972 Maxwell returned to contest the virtually unassailable West Kingston Seat for the PNP against the sitting JLP member Edward Seaga. Not surprisingly, he lost, but his vigorous contestation underlined his defining characteristic as someone willing to stand up for a cause whatever the odds against him might be. John Maxwell eventually returned to the JBC where in 1974 he designed and hosted 'the Public Eye', which became the template for critical, informed, advocacy-oriented talk shows. He still considers his Public Eye conversations with activists on the conditions of employment of domestic workers, leading up to the Government's decision to enact minimum wage legislation as one of his greatest achievements. Maxwell left Public Eye and chaired for a time the National Resource and Conservation Agency, where he argued for legislation to make the entire island of Jamaica a watershed. Years later under a successor government, this law, which prevented the arbitrary burning of woodland, was eventually passed. Later in the Seventies, John returned to the JBC, but in a *déjà vu* moment, a new government came to power and he was once more out of a job, leading to the latest phase of his colourful life, in which he has been a lecturer at the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication (CARIMAC) and occasionally at the University of Technology and during which, above all, he has written what has been aptly described as a 'compellingly vexatious' weekly column entitled 'Common Sense' in the *Sunday Observer*. Maxwell has brought to all his writing, but particularly these recent columns, an unprecedented accumulation of knowledge, a profound concern for accuracy and a deep compassion for people and the environment that even his detractors are forced to recognise.

Chancellor, time does not permit us the latitude to quote from any of Maxwell's numerous columns opposing the war in Iraq, against the overbuilding of the urban landscape, in support of the historically marginalised Haitian people and in favour of the poor and powerless of Jamaica. Instead, I once again revert to a description sketched by fellow journalist Desmond Allen, who describes him vividly as a 'Gladiator wielding a merciless pen'. That in miniature captures the ethic and aesthetic of John Maxwell, journalist, giant, Jamaican, on whom I urge you to confer, Chancellor, by the power, vested in you by the Senate and the Council of The University of the West Indies, the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

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Mona Campus