



# Mohammed Shahabuddeen

Mr. Chancellor,

It is said of Guyana, our neighbour to the south, that it is a land of sharp contrasts and abiding paradoxes: the paradox of the bustle of the coastal strip and the silence of the hinterland, the paradox of a dream of continental destiny and the sense of belonging to the island communities to the north, of an agricultural sub economy in physical and cultural isolation from an urban commercialism. Our graduand today, in a way embodies symbolically this national characteristic. He springs from the humblest of origins, yet moves easily in the international corridors of justice, diplomacy and power. Possessed of a calm self-effacing personality, his is a life of ceaseless and intense intellectual activity.

I beg leave, Mr. Chancellor, to present **Mohammed Shahabuddeen**, Judge of the International Court of Justice, holder of the Order of Excellence, the Order of Roraima, and the Cacique Crown of Honour of his native Guyana, Bachelor of Laws, Master of Laws and Doctor of Laws, Doctor of Philosophy and Bachelor of Science in Economics, lawyer, public servant, politician and diplomat.

Born in 1931 in Vreed-en-Hoop, a small town facing the capital, Georgetown, across the tired stained waters of the Demerara River, he is one of four brothers, the grandsons of indentured labourers. At an early age he moved farther west to Huist Dieren, a village in the Essequibo district, there to grow up in a small farming community, moving to its slow but harsh rhythms. He attended primary and secondary schools, such as they were, and secured at the end of his labours the Primary School Leaving Certificate and the Pupil Teachers Certificate. At the age of fifteen his formal schooling had ended. Unable to find a teaching appointment he studied privately under a retired schoolmaster with signal success for in the next three years he had won the Junior and Senior School Certificates and the London Matriculation Certificate. Still unemployed he had no clear vision of a suitable career, heard no clarion call to any long nurtured ambition. Such were the inauspicious beginnings of the illustrious career that was to follow. With nothing to lose and excited by the prospect of visiting a metropolis, he accepted the invitation of a cousin to travel to England to seek employment there. He had developed a thirst for further education but lacking in financial support, was obliged to take a succession of odd jobs while contemplating a career. Full-time university education clearly was out of the question, but an application to the Middle Temple Inn met with success. Here at last was a way out of his dilemma, an opportunity to give focus to his ambition. He would be a lawyer. Spare time study and a growing passion for this discipline soon propelled him to success with distinction at the Bar Finals in 1952 and an external LLB of London University a year later. These were the years of the dramatic turn of events in Guyana.

*Over Guyana, clouds*

*And they go rushing on across the country*

*Staining the land with shadow as they pass*

Alas, the celebrated victory of the bi-racial Peoples Progressive Party was soon followed by its swift demise after a mere four months in power. The time was hardly propitious, but he returned, in July of 1954, to a Guyana in turmoil, to establish himself in private practice as an advocate. Notwithstanding the demands of his

practice of time and energy, such was his thirst for knowledge and capacity for sustained effort that he found the time for further private study. Within five years he had achieved success as a practitioner, had married and acquired two additional degrees the Master of Laws and the Bachelor of Science in Economics. Yet these solid marks of achievement were somehow clouded by personal frustrations. Following the dictates of his conscience, he forsook private practice for public service and accepted an appointment as Magistrate. His service in this position, however, was short-lived for after a few months he was invited by the Acting Attorney-General, Shridath Ramphal, now our distinguished Chancellor, to join the Chambers of the Attorney General as Crown Counsel. Three years later he was appointed Solicitor General, a post he held with distinction from 1962 to 1973 becoming the Chief Legal Adviser to Government on all major international questions. When Sir Shridath left the post of Attorney General for active duty at the United Nations and subsequently to take up the post of Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Mohammed Shahabuddeen was his logical successor. By these acts of progression he entered the world of politics and became a Minister of Government. At various times, in the years that followed he was Minister of Justice, Acting Foreign Minister, Vice President and Deputy Prime Minister, earning a reputation as a skilled negotiator and an expert on legal affairs especially those related to constitutional law. He attended conferences of Commonwealth Heads of Government, and Summit Conferences, and meetings of Law Ministers, the United Nations and the Organization of American States. Not the least of his accomplishments was his work as legal adviser on the Government teams which negotiated the nationalisation of the sugar and bauxite industries. These experiences led to the publication of two books:

Nationalisation of Guyana Bauxite (1981) and  
From Plantocracy to Nationalisation (1983)

which give remarkable insights not only to the cut and thrust of the negotiating process but also to the extraordinary inflexibility of the owners of these industries regarding subordination of public interest to private gain. Writing in the foreword of the second book Sir Shridath put it this way:

*... It is not only a major contribution to the historical literature on the Guyana sugar industry but originating from the work on the legal aspects of nationalisation and written by a lawyer, it captures a fascinating and unique perspective ...*

During this long period of unrelenting service, his interest in academic pursuits was not to be denied. Miraculously, he was able in his spare time, to carry out research on constitutional development in Guyana, which led to the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1970, and to read successfully for the Doctor of Laws degree in 1986. Thus he had acquired five university degrees, including two Doctorates, without ever having been enrolled as a full-time university student. He also served on the Board of Governors of the University of Guyana and for many years was a member of the Council of Legal Education of the Commonwealth Caribbean. His election to the International Court of Justice in 1987, the first from the Commonwealth Caribbean to be accorded this signal honour, was received with wide acclaim. It was fitting recognition of his personal stature as a legal luminary and by extension a manifestation of the high international status accorded to the legal traditions of the region.

We honour today a man who in his march to greater glory has overcome many difficulties. We recognise him as a warm and eminently human person who has made a major impact on his discipline and on the public life of the region.

I request you, Mr. Chancellor, by the authority of Senate and Council to admit Mohammed Shahabuddeen to the Degree of Laws, *honoris causa*.