



JAMES O'NEIL LEWIS

Mr Chancellor

In 1950, when he was only thirty-one years old, James O'Neil Lewis occupied the position of Economic Adviser to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Since this was in the period of Colonial Office rule he was arguably in a more powerful position than the biggest Trinidad and Tobago politician.

But he worked closely with Albert Gomes who encouraged him to think of taking a degree in Development Economics from the famous London school.

In 1963, Mr Chancellor, James O'Neil Lewis was home and high in newly Independent Trinidad and Tobago. He was Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance, and Head of the Civil Service. He was at the elbow of the one who held the steering wheel.

Late in his career he would say: "Civil servants never wanted or sought to have recognition. We were in the British tradition. I think we are now destroying that tradition in this country because civil servants are treated like nothing. They are no good, people say. They are idiots. When God was sharing brains he gave all to the politicians and the businessmen."

I don't know how a man could be so close to politicians and not play politician himself. How a man could be so close to power and be so free of the ambition to exercise power himself. How a man could dream that influence could be anything but a moveable convenience as far as power was concerned. Mr Chancellor I almost want to ask you to admit this man to the degree because his head is so hard and pure.

Only narrative, Mr Chancellor, can measure the steps by which James O'Neil Lewis came to be one of us. Only narrative can contain the tensions that lie beneath the impressive facts of a distinguished career.

His mother came from Nevis; his father was an inveterate newspaper-reading policeman from Barbados who ever believed that "you Trinidadians do not speak English". In 1930, Scottie captured one of the

eight Government Exhibitions, the only way he would have been able to go to secondary school. On his first speech day at QRC he gazed from a distance at a youth who was going up and down the platform collecting prize after prize.

Much later, they would get close. The distance would remain.

There was a scandal when the Junior Cambridge results for 1934-35 came out. The published results were rescinded and Scottie lost his scholarship into the Sixth Form. His diabetic father had retired from the Police Service and would not be able to find the required \$16.00 dollars per term.

On January 2, 1936, therefore, he went to the Trinidad Guardian at \$2.00 per week. He never thought he would see the inside of a University.

In 1938 he entered the public service as an acting fourth class clerk in the Audit Department. In 1941 he was shifted to the Railway Stores Accounts Department. Still acting fourth class. They took his fellow worker Ulric Cross into the RAF but they left him out. Then he got another acting fourth-class appointment: he sorted mail and shifted bulging bags until War conditions brought about his graduation to the stamp counter.

It happened like this, Mr Chancellor.

Selling stamps to the public in those days was an occupation for White ladies. When the British Government decided to establish a censorship office to read people's letters, it was felt, for whatever reason, that ladies might be more skilled to perform this operation. There were transfers. There were vacancies to be filled. And so it came about that against all previous principle, an ancient taboo was broken and non-White persons were elevated to the rank of stamp-sellers.

All this time, Mr Chancellor, Scottie was a member of the 'Why Not' Discussion Group that used to meet at the Braithwaite house at 12B Norfolk Street. "We asked questions. We wanted internal self-government. We wanted a University. We wanted a copy of every book published in England. We wanted all sorts of fantastic things."

Bright Trinidadians were signing up for external degrees in Law, History and English. The prodigious Arthur Lewis of St Lucia had gone overseas and taken a B. Com. degree and this inspired Scottie to break from the pattern and try for the B. Com. himself. He got his distance degree. It was not the real education in a learning and teaching community that he and the 'Why Not' group yearned for: "Mine was a pass degree - not a major achievement- and I specialised in Money and Banking about which to this day I know very little." He went back to the Guardian as a Senior Sub-Editor.

Mr Chancellor throughout his life people only have to hear about this man and they are ready to offer him jobs and scholarships. Our distinguished colleague Errol Hill called him up one day and asked him to work as an Administrative Officer with the British Council. Then the Government Economic Adviser, Mr Arthur Shenfield telephoned the native with the B.Com. to offer him the position of Assistant Economic Adviser.

He went to the LSE as a government scholar. Towards the end of his first year, Scottie went to the Commonwealth Institute to hear a lecture

by an Oxford Professor. He impressed the Professor so much that within two weeks he was offered a place at Eric Williams's old college, St Catherine's.

The B. Litt thesis on satellite economies that he completed at Oxford was entitled "A Comparison of Economic Development in Puerto Rico on the one hand; and Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago on the other". The main thesis, and the introductory chapter on oil in Trinidad put Scottie in demand for at least a decade.

Before Scottie could leave Oxford, the Government in Trinidad had put him in a job at the West Indies Commission in London. Dr Williams now started planning for him. In 1957 Scottie was sent to Geneva as a GATT Fellow. Here he became an expert on the Treaty of Rome and delivered a lecture to the Geneva Economic Society that led directly to the offer of a job in the Economics and Research Division of GATT.

But he was hot stuff, Mr Chancellor, and Williams was not letting him go. He was ordered to return home to be Assistant Economic Adviser. Williams pulled him closer by making him Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. Supporting British entry into the Common Market when most countries like ours felt threatened by it, Williams sent Scottie to Brussels as his personal representative there to monitor British progress. Scottie's star continued to rise. He was named High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

Mr Chancellor we must focus on the moment when Dr Williams asked his Head of the Civil Service "to settle the civil service problem". Williams was about to go on what some referred to as his African safari, and he expected solutions before Scottie left for London. Thirty-four years later it is beginning to come home to us that the civil service problem can't be settled in two weeks. While Scottie was occupied with his distracting task, a party stalwart was sent to London as High Commissioner in his stead.

The opening chapters of the 'Report on the Role and Status of the Trinidad and Tobago Civil Servant in the Age of Independence' are still regarded as a basic text on the subject. It was the recommending of higher salaries for Civil Servants that provoked a turn in Scottie's career. He should have told the doctor he was not in favour. In his own words, the Report "marked my departure into outer space. I was banished".

For three months nobody knew what to do with Scottie, and he did not know what to do with himself. Then he was summoned by Williams. There was trouble in the Sugar Belt.

At the age of forty-six, the top civil-servant was called upon to serve as a Member of the Industrial Court that was being set up under Sir Isaac Hyatali. He served. After nine years there he was asked to go as Ambassador to Belgium and the European Economic Community for eighteen months. He went. He was instructed by the Big Man to follow a Caribbean line, follow the Ramphal line, and make sure that the interests of the people of Trinidad and Tobago are not overlooked. He complied.

Mr Chancellor, this Civil Servant of the old school did not get lost on the wider stage. He made use of the outposting in Europe to advertise and serve Caribbean interests. As Chairman of the Negotiating Committee on Trade and Sugar for what became the ACP States, he was largely

responsible for getting the Community to surrender the principle of reciprocity: they would open their markets to everyone but we wouldn't have to open our markets to them.

The agreed eighteen months passed, the first LOME was signed and Scottie was ready to return home. He was kept on in Brussels for another six or seven years to deal with matters arising, and to assist in interpreting the Convention. He had been there from the start. Politicians had come and gone. He remained. He knew everything. He turned his banishment into an opportunity to advertise and serve Caribbean interests. He made openings. He stopped doors from closing.

On the death of the first Prime Minister, Scottie was recalled by Mr Chambers and appointed Ambassador to the United States of America, the Organisation of American States, and Mexico where he served from 1983 to 1987. Then, at last, he came home. Since 1988 he has served as Deputy Chairman of the Integrity Commission.

At the time of the humiliation of the great Learie Constantine by his Prime Minister in London in 1963, Scottie was so upset that he left the room with Sir Learie : "Learie, you know civil servants have to put up with that, but I didn't expect it to happen to you man, not you, I'm sorry." Constantine could handle bodyline. He would move his head but he was staying in place. He said he had a right to serve his country, but he understood he did not have the right to serve it how he liked. Something crystallised for Scottie: "Those words remained with me ever since because I have come to accept them, believe them. I have a right to serve this country in which I was born. Not to serve it how I like but in some way to serve it".

Mr Chancellor, James O'Neil Lewis has been an exemplary civil servant offering administrative skills and technical expertise in economic matters for over fifty years. He has worked under Colonial administrators and pre-Independence politicians. He served our first Prime Minister with an almost perverse fidelity. He was privy to the complicated negotiations and unwritten texts that would explain why the West Indian Federation failed so miserably. He provided Williams with ammunition in the battle for the return of Chaguaramus.

He has represented the country as a diplomat and as an expert on the economics of development. He has negotiated successfully with the oil people, the European free market people, players in Agriculture and dealers in high finance. He has known intimately and interacted with all the men and women and all the other forces shaping this country between 1940 and 1983. He has been a shaping influence himself.

Mr Chancellor I have tried to give you a portrait of a vanishing breed, of a man who served his country not according to his own will but according to what it required of him so long as it was not dishonourable to do so.

I request you by the authority of the Senate and Council to admit James O'Neil Lewis civil servant extraordinaire to the degree of Doctor of Laws.