



## *Trevor McDonald*

Mr. Chancellor,

When it was announced in late 1995 that Trevor McDonald would be Chairman of the Better English Campaign, a new independent group to encourage children in English secondary schools to speak clearly in Standard English, the newspapers came up with apparently submissive headlines. *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* had the bright idea of using the phrase with which the new-look ITN introduces the human interest story or odd spot that closes its News at Ten broadcast: 'And finally, Trevor McDonald is the voice of the nation' said the one, 'And finally, good news for English as it is spoke' echoed the other. *The Times* played at being straight: 'Trevor McDonald to be English arbiter'. *The Daily Mail* got familiar and sacrificed truth to gain a pun: 'Trevor is called in to help put the accent on good speaking.'

Mr. Chancellor, everybody can't be like Mike. What the poor Education Secretary was saying is that every language has a formal or educated register and that children should be taught to read and write it. She found it necessary to insist: "*I have no wish for everyone from the North East, or from Norfolk or even from the Thames estuary to drop their rich regional accents in favour of so-called BBC English*".

Like everybody else the Education Secretary thought that one of the best speakers of formal English was Trevor McDonald, sole presenter since 1992 of ITN's top British news programme *News at Ten*. Nearly seven million people see and hear him on television five nights a week, and they hear every syllable in the words he is saying. All the popular polls in England, and all the professional broadcasting organisations rate him the best news broadcaster by far in the country. He is probably the clearest articulator speaking in any language today. All of this is why he was chosen to head Mrs. Shephard's campaign.

Why I am calling him Trevor you will understand as the ballad proceeds.

It is said among television broadcasting experts that 7% of perceived meaning comes from words, 55% from posture and body language, and 38% from intonation. That is why we have the expression 'Watching TV'. McDonald is the best of the television broadcasters because he does not encourage such mindlessness. You can turn your back to the television set while Trevor is presenting the news because he is reinstating the word as the main carrier of meaning. The radio man from Trinidad spent his first three years in England working in radio with the BBC Overseas Service (1969-1973). Those who work in radio depend upon the power of the word to make you hear, to make you feel, even to make you see. When Trevor went to ITN TV he took that attitude to the word with him.

The English that Trevor speaks, his attitude to the word, and the style of journalism he performs cannot be separated from one another. And their roots are to be found in the colonial Trinidad of his childhood.

A passage in his book *Fortunate Circumstances* shows how as 'A Trinidad Apprentice' Trevor's interest in language was in the sounds of the language, and how that interest and delight are subservient to an obsession with journalism:

*I saw real possibilities in the business of communication and was fascinated by radio journalism with its scope, I believed, for the imaginative use of language and colour. For that I was indebted to the BBC. Its World Service was like a friend and mentor throughout my adolescence and for much of my adult life in Trinidad. On warm Caribbean evenings, after night had fallen like a stone and long before the advent of television in Trinidad, the mellifluous cadences of John Arlott, the precision of Richard Dimbleby, and the professional skill and polish of BBC correspondents around the world were my inspiration. What I liked most about the BBC's reporting was its authority and apparent fearlessness. Very early in my career, my attempts to emulate the latter were to get me into trouble.*

Mr. Chancellor, Trevor has gained recognisability for many things. One year he was even voted the tie man of the United Kingdom. But his fame will rest on his contribution to broadcast journalism, as evidenced in his practice and in his continuing commentary on the nature and functions of that endangered art.

Reflecting on the effects of the big TV interview and on the appropriateness of bringing Saddam Hussein into the homes of decent English people, he employed the argument about the public's right to know and emphasised his position by saying that if he had been around he would certainly have tried to interview Adolf Hitler. His greatness as a journalist is that while he has strong feelings and opinions that prevent him from seeing the facts as pure dead facts, he has a clear notion of the orthodoxies he ought in theory to be observing;

*However attractive a prospect it might seem, our job is not to soothe the anxieties or to dim the horrors of the world . We report what happens in the world as it is - we can do nothing else. We cannot be social engineers, we cannot always succeed in making people make good about themselves or about the world and I am not even sure that can be defined as part of our job. The job of a television journalist or any other journalist is to report fairly, accurately, and in a balanced way what he sees and what he learns.*

It is in this increasingly important field, still in its early stages on our campuses, that he can be said to be carrying out the work of the University.

Trevor Alfa McDonald went to College in the cross-cultural city of San Fernando, and had a Naparima education which used to be the closest thing to an education in the liberal arts. At Naparima College you would listen to the History-English sandwiches of Paray Ramanarine, the urgent rising rhythms of Ben O Yisudas, the Bajan Creole tones of the Classics master who fathered Sprangalang, Canadian renderings of *A Brighter Sun*, frequent singing of "*All Things Bright and Beautiful*", Errol Sitahal cutting his actor's teeth on Shakespeare, and a host of schoolboy voices denying colour but fighting to be colourful in the endless flow of oration contests and debates. The old tradition of reading loving and quoting literature was being maintained by Jimmy Lee Wah.

Two capitalists, Ramchand and Samaroo, ran a newspaper called *The Blue Circle Supplement* and when they expanded the business to form *The Blue Circle Network* the newscasters selected were Ashton Chambers, Bobbie Thomas, and one Trevor McDonald, famous for his non-stop reproductions of *British Movietone* and *Pathe News* while you were trying to take in the 10 a.m. Western. It didn't take Trevor long to become the anchorman.

At home in Claxton Bay he was being given elocution lessons, and shielded from the Americanisms and Americanisation of comic books. He was fed a steady diet of reading material, including stale newspapers, and was orally examined by a father whose ambition for his son to be the best at anything the son wanted was unrelenting and inescapable. One instance at last, Mr. Chancellor, of my father fathering me.

Trevor came to us crackling with correct cadence and accent, and he took these with him in 1958 to his work with the *Voice of Rediffusion* and *Radio Trinidad* where he did Sports, Special Events and Political Personalities. He travelled the islands following his stories as he was later to travel the world. Someone unwittingly prepared him for professionalism under pressure by commanding Trevor to stop looking at the sky for relief, turn up at the ground and give the local sponsor something for his money: "*Rain or no rain I want to hear commentary.*"

But the first logic of a sound colonial education is the journey to the metropolis. He had begun to think of Trinidad as "*an improbable lotus land*" where problems were wiped away by the certainty of the next party. The kind of journalism he was being forced to practice was not the kind of journalism he wanted to devote his life to. No criticism. No dissent. No challenge. No investigative journalism. He was becoming disenchanted. He left the island in 1969 to join the Overseas Service of the BBC.

From this point Trevor McDonald began the life he had dreamt about and prepared for. The facts are well-known Mr. Chancellor, but it is necessary to register them as part of this day's record.

From the World Service of the BBC he went to his first television job in the United Kingdom, joining ITN as a reporter in 1973 and spending a lot of dangerous time in Northern Ireland (a colonial himself from a country of many religions, but no tradition of this kind of violence); in 1978, he became Sports Correspondent, reporting on World Cup Soccer in Argentina; in 1980, he was appointed ITN Diplomatic Correspondent reporting from the Middle East and the United States and on European Community negotiations; he took this title to Channel 4 News in 1982, becoming Diplomatic Editor in 1987; from co-presenter of FIN News, he overcame stiff competition to become sole presenter or anchor in 1992 to replace Sir Alastair Burnet grandmaster of the 1970's and 1980's and to inaugurate a new format and a new era.

The move from radio to television had other consequences but it marked emphatically, the arrival of the journalist as instant traveller to the news site. It took him to faraway places, and exciting events, and brought him face to face with the many of the actors on the world's stage - the beautiful, the bad, the ugly, and those with nothing to say and who therefore ask you to read their lips. In a room full of men in suits with bulging armpits, he could look Saddam Hussein in the eye and ask "*Is it a very Arab thing to invade and rape a neighbouring country?*" In the chill corridors of the Kremlin he could talk with a top Gorbachev aide about the death of his father in Trinidad. He could broadcast scathingly about two American Presidential campaigns and show up the illiteracy, dotage and dotishness of two Presidents he had met. He could witness the breaking down of the Berlin Wall. His heart could swell with pride as he beheld Nelson Mandela emerge into freedom after so many long years.

To visit the scenes of violence and suffering improved the reporting of this uniquely feeling and unashamedly emotional journalist, but there was a price to pay. "*In a remote corner of Mozambique I saw people surviving on a daily diet of grass and roots, gouged out of river beds burnt dry by the drought. There were painful, searing scenes of mothers unable to feed their children.*" In Northern Ireland his heart bled for the children traumatised by violence and for the future of a land that exposed them to such violence on every side: "*I have never before, nor have I since, been in any place so overrun with wasteful death. Dismembered parts of bodies were everywhere - limbs that once must have felt so powerful, fed by hearts so hopeful, now dangled helplessly from flowering trees and bushes.*"

Every time he sees he suffers. He continues to be upset by violence, greed, corruption, religious vices, stupidity, or the cynicism of the world he crosses and re-crosses in the jet trails. Well might he say "*I am bound upon a wheel of fire*", but I think he would prefer to go the way of his friend Ulysses:

*...all times I have enjoyed  
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those  
That loved me, and alone*

*... I am become a name;  
For always roaming with a hungry heart  
Much have I seen and known; cities of men  
And manners, climates, councils, governments,*

In one of the finest moments in Trevor's work the living sainthood of Nelson Mandela surprises him into confessing that cynicism and the trivial pursuit of headlines are almost the norm in the practice of journalism:

*It proved impossible to get him to gossip, to be petty or to betray the slightest trace of personal bitterness. I tried, employing many of the tricks of my trade to get Mr. Mandela to speak about his time in prison. To be quite honest about it I was looking for something sensational, something which would make banner headlines, but I had gone to the wrong place. ...I felt invigorated by meeting a legend, although in hard journalistic terms I got nothing sensational in an editorial sense.*

Mr. Chancellor, Sir Vidia Naipaul has said that fiction is not enough, it is journalism that will help us to keep up with a rapidly changing world. Mr. Chancellor, if anything, journalism can depress you with its transitoriness and its repeated cycles of violence and corruption where only the names of the actors change. I don't want to get too heavy or too high. But there are enough references to inner gloom insecurity, luck, destiny, and the capriciousness of fortune in Trevor's work to suggest that the order, compassion, belief and reason in his journalism are fictions, fictions of order that express his yearning for these things.

I have spoken about Trevor as a television journalist grounded in the word because of his early training in radio. But I have also described him as a journalist who has taken part in an extension of the limits of journalism in an increasingly technological age. I do not think about him as newsreader, newscaster, anchor or autocue maestro. Each of these is only an aspect of the true journalist, making demands on only a small part of the whole man. In what terms can we properly admire the courage of a man who puts everything in what he does but who beats back for us and for himself the recurring sense that the bad wolf can come and blow the house down?

Mr. Chancellor, a man who cherishes Kenneth Kaunda, Arthur Ashe, and Jesse Jackson, and venerates Nelson Mandela cannot be said to be avoiding Black causes. But it is true that Trevor McDonald is not a Black radical or any kind of radical. He is nevertheless, maybe even because of that, an inspiration to the Black British community. And his face and voice have broken down race and colour prejudice in millions of ordinary homes. This is the surest way to the removal of systems of discrimination based upon race and colour and for that alone we are in his debt. But in his journalism he has taken us through the joys and sorrows, the peace and the wars in a fallen and fragmented world. He has done so with compassion and with a love for life.

I request you Sir by the authority of Senate and Council to admit Trevor Alfa McDonald to the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.