



-Ellis Emmanuel Innocent Clarke-

Mr Chancellor,

The annals of this University contain an impressive list of distinguished honorary graduands drawn from almost every field of human endeavour, but today we break new ground in seeking to honour a head of state who manifestly stands in no need of our annual panegyric. Rather, it is he who dignifies our company by allowing us to pay tribute to the triumphs of his talents and character. I present to you His Excellency Ellis Emmanuel Innocent Clarke, Bachelor of Laws of the University of London, recipient of the Knight Grand Cross of St Michael and St George and of the Trinity Cross, former Governor General and Commander-in-Chief, now President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Born in Belmont, that ugly, lovely suburb of Port-of-Spain, on Innocent's Day, 1917, he was the only child of Cecil and Irma Clarke, the one a civil servant, the other a school mistress and music teacher. His early years passed uneventfully, in the ambience of a strict religious up-bringing, much of his time in the company of another famous clan of the district — the Braithwaites. Although not winning a coveted 'Exhibition' from Primary School, he soon proved himself of that calibre when he proceeded to St Mary's College. Here he excelled at his studies from the first day, crowning his achievements by winning an Island Scholarship and the Gold Medal in 1936. His performance in this final school examination was quite extraordinary — in six papers in Latin and Greek his average was close to ninety percent. It so impressed his teachers that years after it was held up to students of lesser breed as a model of achievement in these subjects.

Ellis Clarke is one of those rare people who never have any difficulty in making up their minds and who, from an early age, know what they want. And what he wanted was to study Law. After a short interlude as a teacher, he was on his way to the United Kingdom in 1937, where he registered for the LLB at the University of London and simultaneously for the Bar exams at Gray's Inn. By the beginning of his third year, World War II had intervened and his class was evacuated to Aberystwyth in Wales, where he completed the law degree with Honours. This easy march to academic success might lead one to believe that he was nothing but a book-worm. Indeed, to give balance to our account of his accomplishments we must faintly mention his second love at the time — dancing. What started as a pleasant pastime became, in London, a raging habit. He never missed an opportunity, assiduously studied Victor Sylvester and rounded off preparation for the Bar exams by attending, in the last month, no fewer than eighteen dances! In 1941 he was called to the Bar and returned to Trinidad.

His passion was the Law, his pleasure the Law, his living became the Law, and being fiercely independent of spirit, he set up office on his own, eschewing the easier path of junior partner in an established firm. The 1940's found Trinidad in political ferment, still unsettled after the difficult years of unrest in the late 30's. Talk of constitutional reform and universal adult suffrage was in the air. All this had not, of course, escaped the young barrister. His own deep perception of the deficiencies of the society had been quickened by his contacts with fellow colonials in England and had stirred an incipient urge to public service. His immediate task, however, was to make a living and he was off to a slow start; for six months he was barely able to support himself. In the event, perseverance prevailed and presently his reputation gathered momentum. At the age of twenty-six, in a never-to-be-forgotten case of slander, he boldly challenged, on points of law, the judgement of an eminent Chief Justice, an Englishman, in respect of the level of award of costs and damages to his client. Astonishingly, his appeal was upheld. The decision was sensational, catching the imagination of professional colleagues and public alike. But this incident had a more profound, if indirect, sequel, for it led to the offer of a Magistracy, ironically from the very Chief Justice. It was the first overt call to public service and was summarily turned down, but it left its mark. Success piled upon success. Other offers were made, each more attractive than the preceding one. It is said of this unusual train of events that Ellis Clarke is the only person ever to be promoted in the Civil Service while yet not a public servant. By 1954 not only had his practice been firmly established but he was recognised by his peers as possessing one of the finest legal brains in the country. Clearly, he was set for a highly lucrative career, which, in that sense, could never be matched by the modest rewards of a public appointment. He had, moreover, added further stability and serenity to his personal life when he married in 1952. Everything, seemingly, was in place. However, a chance remark by Justice Ward about repaying his debt to society, touching again his most sensitive concern, excited an inner response. It was the same voice heard many times before, in a different tone, perhaps, but unmistakable.

*'That Voice is round me like a bursting sea. . . .
'Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee
Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee I did but take
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost I have stored for thee at home
Rise, clasp My hand, and come''*

There was no turning back from the challenge to service. Politics was out. He felt he had no head for it and somehow perceived, as Burke had, that

All government is founded on compromise and barter.

He had nothing against politics. It was simply that he considered it alien to his temperament. When the next offer came, an appointment as Solicitor General, he accepted. It was a monumental decision — one that he never regretted — which ended the first phase of his career and took him in an entirely new direction.

Between 1954 and 1957, his rise in the Public Service was swift — from Solicitor General to Deputy Colonial Secretary and then to Attorney General, in which capacity he served on the Executive Council of the first PNM Government. Winston Mahabir, himself a member of this Government, reflects on the character of Ellis Clarke and the propriety of his relationship with the Prime Minister with this observation:

"No loyalty to any Government could over-ride Clarke's professional integrity....."

When in 1961 the post of Attorney General became political, he was made Chief Justice, but he never assumed this office, and instead, moved to a temporary post of Constitutional Adviser to the Cabinet. Clearly the Government, enormously impressed by his talents, determined to use them to the fullest and as closely as possible to the reins of power.

A new dimension was added to his career after Trinidad and Tobago achieved independence in 1962, when he was posted overseas as Ambassador to the United States and Permanent Representative at the United Nations. Later he also became Ambassador to Mexico and Representative at the Assembly of the Organisation of American States. His tenure as international representative was marked by the same effectiveness which characterised his earlier appointments. Ever the practised advocate, his statements and presentations were models of clarity, informed by thorough research, incisive in analysis and delivered with telling effectiveness in his deliberate, inimitable style. Little more than a year after taking his seat at the UN, he became as Prime Minister Williams noted in a statement to the House of Representatives, 'more and more the recognised spokesman of smaller nations.' From the very beginning he gave notice of the strongly independent line which he always took on his Government's behalf. Here is how he ended his first speech on the occasion of the admission of Trinidad and Tobago to the UN.

". . . We come to the United Nations neither to dissemble nor to toady, we come to offer the point of view of a tiny independent nation, a point of view which we hope will always be clearly reasoned and manifestly reasonable however unacceptable it may be to those who reject it. . ."

He was a passionate supporter of true independence for the smaller territories of the Caribbean and in rebuking the British Government for its parsimony said:

' . . . If freedom means freedom to starve, freedom to be unemployed, freedom to see chaos replace law and order, then these countries indeed are being offered freedom. But if freedom implies the right to an infrastructure which gives a reasonable possibility of standing on one's own feet and seeking to solve one's problems with self-respect; of finding food, shelter and employment for one's citizens, of taking one's independent place in the family of nations, then freedom is certainly denied to our neighbours and relatives. . .'

In recognition of his outstanding services to Trinidad and Tobago, he was awarded a knighthood in 1963 and the country's highest honour — The Trinity Cross — in 1969.

When Sir Solomon Hochoy retired in 1973 Ellis Clarke was recalled to Trinidad to succeed to the office of Governor General and later President, acclaimed by all. The Nation rests — confident of his wisdom, steady in his calm. Scholar, brilliant advocate, statesman, his has been the triumph of modesty and dignity, his the victory of self-sacrifice over self indulgence, self-effacement over self aggrandisement. We hold him high in our hearts and claim him to the University as one of us. I request you, therefore, Mr Chancellor, by the authority of the Senate and Council, to admit His Excellency Ellis Emmanuel Innocent Clarke to the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.