



Pitches,
Pedagogy
and Politics

By Alake Pilgrim

Welcome
to Grenada:
an island
of survival,
recovery
and change.

Three years after Hurricanes Ivan and Emily, a story by longtime Prime Minister and UWI alumnus, the Rt. Hon. Dr. Keith Mitchell, illustrates something of his country's bittersweet reality: Every morning as he walked into his office, Dr. Mitchell would greet the men calling out to him from the prison yard near to the government buildings. During the hurricanes the official residence was severely damaged and he returned to his private home. After Hurricane Ivan, he joined his neighbours in the street to discuss what had happened the night before. "While we were there, this group of men walked up with bags on their backs saying, "PM! Don't worry about us, we going home. When you ready just come and get us." It turns out they were prisoners who had left the damaged jail during the storm.

When asked about the process of reconstructing Grenada after Ivan and Emily, the Prime Minister points to both achievements and ongoing challenges. While much of the physical infrastructure has been rebuilt, there is still some work to be done equipping schools. The challenges that faced the island's youth—HIV & AIDS, drugs and unemployment—are still major issues. Another serious challenge is "the resuscitation of the agricultural sector." Most of the island's farmers are in their fifties and sixties, cultivating crops like cocoa and nutmeg that take five to eight years to grow. Apart from being marginalized economically the farmers are also suffering psychologically, and they are not alone. "Some people lost everything."

As one of its strategies for recovery, the government is focusing on sport as a medium for development, alongside the tourism industry. This is why, Dr. Mitchell says, they invested so much in the National Stadium and the ICC Cricket World Cup. In addition to visitors attending the matches, he is certain that television coverage of the event will have a number of positive spin-offs for the island. Also, he believes that hosting the World Cup has "lifted the spirits of the Grenadian people... Today [after the defeat to New Zealand] they might have been cussing out our team," he admits, laughing. "But that shows you they're passionate about their cricket."

Now in his twenty-third year in political office, the Prime Minister is no stranger to this passion or to humble circumstances. "My parents were very poor so they couldn't think of sending me to university." Despite being one of the top cricketers in the Windward Islands, he seized the offer of a scholarship to attend UWI's Cave Hill campus instead of pursuing a professional sporting career. At the age of twenty, Barbados was the farthest he had ever been from home and turned out to be a life-altering experience. "Some of my closest friends today are still those that I met at University." He joined other young men in one of the community houses on campus. "Six men stayed in two bedrooms," he recalls. "So we had to

Photography by Nazim Benjamin

bond!" As a student, he played cricket for the Empire First Division Club, which gave him the opportunity to interact with test cricketers such as Seymour Nurse, Charlie Griffith and Sir Everton Weekes. The following year, he was made captain of the Cave Hill team and played with students from all three campuses against the England touring team in 1970.

Then came another unexpected life twist in which cricket played a role. "When I returned home after university, because I was captain of Grenada's cricket team, I was sort of a popular person in the country. I was not thinking of running [for political office] but I was critical of the regime at the time. People approached me and said, "Well you always talking, why don't you come and help!" So he agreed to join the campaign on the condition that whatever happened he was going to complete his postgraduate studies. They didn't win and he took up a scholarship to do a Master's degree at Howard University, followed by a PhD in Mathematics and Statistics at American University. In addition to spending five years as a Math professor at Howard, Dr. Mitchell went on to establish his own business as a professional consultant.

However, over a decade later, the call to politics persisted and upon his return to Grenada, he was elected to the House of Representatives in 1984. Now well into his third consecutive term as Prime Minister, having faced social ills, natural disasters and accusations of corruption, Dr. Mitchell has a sobering take on political life. "I think politics in the smaller islands is extremely challenging because people know you on a personal level, so you have to reach the ordinary man... That places huge demands on your resources and, of course, time with family." He and his wife Marietta have one son, Olinga. He advises people against getting into politics unless they have an independent source of income. Furthermore, he points out, "You have to learn to work in a team...and to send the message to people, 'Feel free to come offer me advice', because if you set yourself up as a know-it-all, the fall will be very heavy and very steep."

This consensus-building approach has served Dr. Mitchell in good stead over the years as Chairman of a range of high-profile boards. The same applies to his multiple roles in CARICOM which include ongoing responsibility for Science & Technology, Human Resource Development, and the Prime-Ministerial Sub-committee on Cricket.

Regarding the future of Caribbean integration, he thinks that "we still have a long way to go." Some progress was made during the Cricket World Cup in terms of cooperation among the region's security, immigration and customs systems. However, he "still see[s] an element

of insularity prevailing in the region...When a Caribbean man could say he doesn't want the CSME [Caribbean Single Market and Economy] because a Grenadian "will come and take the job," it tells you how limited we still are...Yet the new world order is saying that if you don't cooperate, you will disintegrate—it's as simple as that. So I think that we will see more integration, but it's not going to happen overnight."

And what of UWI—another major West Indian institution? The Prime Minister supports the positive changes that are underway at The University, while seeing room for improvement. "It should not have taken an American medical school in Grenada to be the first to establish a Cricket Academy...I see a similar lack of aggressiveness in terms of investment in Science and Technology. You can look around and see that most of our leaders in the Caribbean today are from UWI, but it's still playing too limited a role in addressing the issues facing the Caribbean people." He also encourages The

University to reach out more to its alumni. "To tell you how foreign universities operate, at one point the position of President of American University became vacant and they made me feel good enough to say, "Why don't you consider?" He laughingly points out, "They know how to engage you."

In his view, another major issue for The University is the need to have more of an impact in the Eastern Caribbean, providing a wider range of degrees at better-equipped centres throughout the islands and making on-campus study more affordable to Eastern Caribbean students. "When I went

to University, only about five of us left Grenada...We are serving the country in many capacities today, but there were a lot of other people that fell through the cracks because of the lack of opportunity." He suggests that UWI develop links with other tertiary institutions to expand their reach in the ECS.

In terms of his own legacy in the region, "I think I would like to be remembered as someone who tried his best to improve people's lives." Every major aspect of his life, he believes, whether cricket, consulting, teaching or politics, has been people-driven. Today, many of his former students still write to him from around the world. "I went to Jamaica when I became Prime Minister in 1995. The [hotel front desk] called me and said, "There are some people downstairs to see you." When I went down a group of my students was there."

"Politics is just like teaching. It's about the girl or the boy who is not doing well and needs somebody to nurture him or her. When you see them go from one stage to the next because of your help, that's what gives you pride, that is what makes you feel like you're making a contribution."

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