

ADDRESS to QC Reunion

Students of Queen's, past and present,

It was with much trepidation that I agreed to step into the breach after our esteemed teacher and friend to a generation of stellar historians, Bobby Moore, did not find it possible to come. My trepidation had everything to do with deciding on the tone and topic of today's address.

Let me begin with the temptations I have chosen to avoid: there was first of all the temptation of nostalgia and reminiscence, an understandably strong temptation now that so many of us are in each other's presence after so many decades of separation. And perhaps for the last time, as mortality takes its toll. But there will be time enough for old talk and reminiscence over the next few days. Then there was the temptation of lamentation: that the QC of today is not our QC of yesterday. Because of course it isn't. Any more than the Guyana of today is the Guyana of yesterday. The last temptation, and the one I was most determined to avoid, was to use this forum for a partisan political presentation.

Instead, I have chosen to revisit that school of cherished memory and to see what can be extracted from the traditions that nourished it and that may be of value to the school and the country of today. In speaking of those traditions, I will not dwell on the obvious: the cultivation of academic discipline and the striving after

excellence, the athletic prowess at the highest levels, the rich variety of cultural and extra-curricular activities. The point has been sufficiently made, most recently in the *Stabroek News* Editorial of last Friday, that we of the generation of the 50s and 60s, were the beneficiaries of an educational legacy imbued with a colonial ethos and harking back to the public schools and grammar schools of England. "The bad old days of the anti-colonial creed were arguably, in many respects, the good old days for many QC boys of that era." I had, on a previous occasion in this very auditorium, paid some attention to this issue. I made the observation that though I, like many of us, might not have recognized it at the time, I did later come to understand how much of our experience in and out of the classroom was being shaped by the ideology of the Victorian Public School. From early on we were instilled with the sense of responsibility to the traditions to which we were now heirs, traditions of scholarship in the classroom, prowess on the field of sports, and leadership within the group. The programme was clear: as the cream of the crop, we were to be trained to take up our rightful place in the middle and upper echelons of the colonial hierarchy. We were the last of the colonially educated generations, the product of empire for the service of empire. The extent to which we would be able to retain, build on and deepen the best of the learned values while jettisoning what was oppressive and backward-looking was to be the supreme test of my own generation. Sad to say, it was not a test that many who went on to assume positions of leadership in the society managed to pass. On the contrary, too many were seduced by the habits of authoritarianism and hierarchical privilege, blinkered in their lack of concern for the poor and the powerless.

George Lamming put it this way when, in writing of Walter Rodney, he says: "the school became the most accessible means of rescuing their offspring from

the enslavement of estate labour. But what began as a necessary strategy of self-emancipation would become, in our time, a major obstacle to national liberation. For the mystique of the educated one has proved to be a mystifying influence on the Guyanese and West Indian masses throughout the process of decolonization. It has been one of the permanent features of the imperial experiment. Education was a means of escape from the realities of labour, a continuing flight from the foundations of society. To grow up was to grow away. Cultural imperialism is not an empty or evasive phrase. It is the process and effect of a tutelage that has clung to the ex-colonial like his skin. It is the supreme distinction of Walter Rodney that he had initiated in his personal and professional life a decisive break with the tradition he had been trained to serve." I argued then that what was missing from Lamming's insightful analysis was that along with the tradition we were being trained to serve, or even within it, we also extracted, those of us who were so inclined, the value and techniques and tools of contestation and critical thinking and, in the best instances, the moral basis of private and public action.

Out of all this, I have chosen today to dwell on values not often enough celebrated and perhaps somewhat more difficult to measure: the values of sharing, solidarity and togetherness, values that survived and persisted in the midst of and in spite of the colonial deformations. It has been argued, quite persuasively I believe, that these values were rooted in our ancestral past. They had survived slavery and indenture and the overlay of Northern and Western value systems we were being taught to revere, with their enthronement of the individual and their devaluation of community.

I believe that when we come together as we have done this week, these are the unacknowledged values that bind us and draw us into communion. The turmoil

and convulsions of the 60s when Guyana exploded in an orgy of blood-letting and communal violence were the most deadly assault on these values, achieving in a few short years what not even slavery and indenture and the colonial oppression had succeeded in doing. Instead of the green shoots of sharing, solidarity and togetherness, toxic pools of malignity widening and deepening drop by drop. And over the years the slow drip has continued, poisoning our relations and blighting our development.

The recent unwelcome arrival of organized narcotics related crime spawned rival armed gangs and let loose a torrent of gun violence on all sides. The welcome respite these last few years from the surges of violence that followed the infamous Mashramani jailbreak of 2002 is no cause for complacency. Guyana has been deeply traumatized by the spree of killings. Families have been shattered, communities drawn in on themselves, remembering the worst and fearing the worst. There is little doubt that atrocities like the Lusignan massacre of January 2008 feed into the remembered history of the Indian community, reinforcing and renewing the earlier trauma of the 60s, a collective memory that shaped their identity over the following generations. The extra-judicial and vigilante gunning down of scores of African young men contributed to a sense of a cycle of violence and counter-violence, blood for blood, triggering the other collective memory and its own trauma.

I have chosen to invoke this web of values, frail as it was, because I believe that there is no greater nor more urgent task confronting us today in our troubled, tormented country – and ours is not the only or even the worst of the fatally riven places of the world -- than the overcoming of the accumulated bitterness and fears of the past, the slow and deadly drip that if left unchecked will

continue to poison the present and the future. What we require is what John Paul Lederach, in an inspiring book on the building of peace, *The Moral Imagination*, calls “constructive social change” which he defines as the pursuit of moving relationships from those defined by fear, mutual recrimination, and violence toward those characterized by love, mutual respect, and proactive engagement. “Constructive social change seeks to change the flow of human interaction in social conflict from cycles of destructive relational violence toward cycles of relational dignity and respectful engagement. The flows of fear destroy. The flows of love edify. That is the challenge: how to move from that which destroys to that which builds.” It is my belief, and I am not alone in this belief, that if we are to create space for our citizens, within and outside our borders, to come together and work to construct the free and open society built on the fundamental values of liberty, equality and justice and where no citizen shall be enslaved by poverty and ignorance, we must set our face resolutely against the easy reflexes of suspicion, distrust, revenge and recrimination. But we must do more. We must embrace reconciliation and aspire to a higher humanity.

In this regard no-one has been a greater inspiration for our time than the titanic Nelson Mandela, the apostle of reconciliation. It is universally recognized that the central fact of Mandela’s life is his extraordinary humanity. In South Africa they call this *ubuntu*, a sense that one’s uniqueness on earth is the quality of humanity one extends to others. Mandela was not the first to embrace this life affirming principle. Born on the second day of this month of October 140 years ago, the luminous Mahatma Gandhi, in his teachings and practice, summoned us to the highest ideals of human behaviour. All of Gandhi's campaigns of nonviolence were underpinned by a hunger for reconciliation, for the cultivation

of friendship with his opponent. And as we know, he was murdered for not hating enough.

Closer home, we are meeting today in the last week of October, almost 26 years to the day, when our Caribbean suffered its greatest trauma of modern times as the Grenadian revolution self-destructed in a storm of violence and murder that opened the way to the invasion by the United States armed forces. A few weeks ago, the last of those held responsible for the murder of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop and his colleagues were released after 26 years in prison. Their release was not uncontroversial. More than a year before their release, on New Year's Day 2008, Nadia Bishop, the daughter of Maurice Bishop, issued her remarkable call for reconciliation to the people of Grenada. Nadia Bishop's words should be etched in stone and committed to memory by the entire political class of the Caribbean and particularly of Guyana.

"...pain does not justify staying in pain. I don't mean to imply that our individual stories are invalid, or that we should diminish our personal experience, but we have focused on our stories of loss for so long that we must let them go if we are truly to embrace reconciliation.....

Let us from this day forward tell a new story about our people. Let us tell a story of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of renewed purpose, of renewed faith, of renewed hope...

We are too small a nation to continue this way.

We have focused for the past 24 years on our differences. Let us focus on the similarities at the core of our humanity. We all say we want world peace. We see so clearly that Israelis and Palestinians must come together in order to

achieve peace and stability. We see so clearly what needs to be done in Darfur with warring factions, but do we see the need to speak with a Coardite if we are a Bishop supporter? Do we see the need to speak with a Bishop supporter if we are a former detainee?

I suggest that it is time that we see the need. We must reach out to each other.

Let us be examples of peace in the world. If we can't find common ground with our brothers and sisters here in our own country, why do we expect peace to exist anywhere else in the world? Let each of us individually this year BE the change that we want to see in the world. “

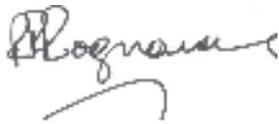
Mervyn Claxton, the former head of UNESCO's anti-apartheid programme, reflecting on Nadia Bishop's summons to her Grenadian sisters and brothers to a higher humanity, has written that whether she knew it or not, Nadia's call for unconditional forgiveness and reconciliation “appealed to deeply-entrenched values in at least two of our ancestral cultures.” Claxton made the point that traditional societies in Africa and India accorded great importance to such values which they saw as absolutely essential for maintaining social harmony and promoting solidarity in their multicultural societies. He argued that our ancestral values of forgiveness and reconciliation evolved within societies that were constructed on fundamental community values of integration, solidarity, and togetherness.

What I am suggesting, I hope not too fancifully, is that our generation at Queens was growing to adulthood in an environment that had not completely lost touch with those ancestral values that accorded great importance to such inclusive values as sharing, solidarity, and togetherness. If we can learn to revive these

values and let them provide a foundation for that constructive social change, if we embrace the idea that the quality of our life is dependent on the quality of life of others, that “the well-being of our grand-children is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy’s grand-children,” then we will have opened a space for renewal and hope.

We can continue to let the worst of the past defeat the best of the present, or we can let the best of the past be marshaled against the worst of the present. Let our re-union be a celebration of the best and the healthiest of the values of the past. If we can transmit this experience that shaped us, I believe we would have fulfilled our generational duty to the present.

Rupert Roopnaraine

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'R. Roopnaraine', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Georgetown
28 October 2009