

The Desmond Allen Interviews

Dr Richard Bernal: In the service of his country he has found himself

In the world of intrigue, high drama and raw politics that is Washington, DC, countries, wanting to stay ahead of the game, dispatch only their finest and most astute diplomatic minds. They had better. In the jungle of democracy that is the United States capital, only the strong and the shrewd survive.

For 10 years, Dr Richard Leighton Bernal, a man born, it would seem, to the service of his country, worked the corridors of world power in Washington and held the Jamaican flag high as Ambassador to the United States. He walked among the high-powered diplomats as if he was from the biggest and richest country on earth and earned a respect well beyond the size and population of this small island.

When **Michael Manley** sent him there in 1991, it was just in the nick of time. The world was in a hurry to restructure trade relations through regional arrangements, such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and international super agencies, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In the global scheme of things, trade-offs were the order of the day and those who could not play the game would be left behind. Bernal brought Jamaican intellect and energy, articulation, charm and a sunny personality that kept Jamaica solidly in the mix. If it was egg, Jamaica was in the red. It would earn him the gratitude of a nation and

nothing less than the country's fourth highest honour, the Order of Jamaica (OJ).

He stayed in the post longer than any other Jamaican but it was only a stop on journey that began on the verandah of a civil servant father who sowed the seed of service to country. And when he had completed national service in Washington, it was immediately to the English-speaking Caribbean region that he was assigned, with a mission to articulate and defend the vital economic interests of the fledgling Caribbean Community, through the Regional Negotiating Machinery (RNM).

Hopping the bread cart

Richard is the only child of **Kathleen Cecelia Maxwell** and **Franklin Abraham Bernal**. Franklin Bernal was a civil servant but is perhaps better known for his seminal work, *Birds of Jamaica*. Shortly after Richard's birth at the Victoria Jubilee Hospital on November 30, 1949, his parents moved house to middle class Richmond Park. His main recollection of 1950s Richmond Park was of the many vendors who plied their wares in the community, making it mostly unnecessary to go to the grocery store. They sold fruits, fish, bread, milk and the like. He delighted in hopping onto the bread cart to drown himself in the irresistible aroma of freshly baked bread. These were innocent days. The supermarket has largely replaced the itinerant vendors of yesteryear.

Richard was sent to the Richmond Park Preparatory School, which he says still exists today. It was a small but

good school and from there he passed his Common Entrance Exam to high school, gaining a government scholarship in the process. He had selected Kingston College, his father's *alma mater*, but while they awaited the results of the exam, his parents moved again, this time to the newly built Mona Heights community. When the results came out, he was sent to nearby Jamaica College.

Happy days in Mona Heights

Mona Heights was the first public housing development financed by the government and built by the **Matalons**. Many civil servants bought homes there. Bernal says it was the first planned community with three parks; a community centre; two tennis courts and two badminton courts; churches at both ends of the community; a petrol station and paved sidewalks contrasting with the grass or dirt paths that were features of other communities. He spent much time with his maternal grandmother, **Gertrude Maxwell** and played with his 12 cousins. Some of the people who lived at Mona included **Ward Mills**, now at Grace Kennedy, **Dr Michael Witter** of UWI fame and **Dr Douglas McDonald**.

Richard also remembers the many hours he spent reading, something his parents encouraged and as an only child he had much time to read...voraciously. Every Saturday they would take him to the Sangster's Book Store and he would read anything from the *Hardy Boys* to the Six Volumes regarded as a classic on 11th Century England. They mutually agreed not to have a television in the house and

the time was spent reading. “Up till today, I read every night before going to bed,” he avows.

For country and not for self

Mr Bernal had a passion for country and his home at Daisy Avenue would be a forum for intense discussions on topical events and issues such as the West Indies Federation, Jamaican Independence and the news of the day. Young Richard listened silently and wondered at the intellect of regular visitors to the home, including the likes of a **G Arthur Brown, Ambassador Don Mills, Ambassador Ashton Wright** and the **March** brothers who were both judges, among other easily recognised names. G Arthur Brown, the eventual governor of the Bank of Jamaica (BOJ) would reappear in his later life. But for the moment he took from their discussions the notion that man must serve beyond his own narrow interest, the first seeds surely, of nationalism and patriotism.

Although Bernal had initially chosen KC, he was happy at JC and did well there. He liked the fact that the school produced so many national leaders, among them the late Prime Minister Michael Manley, his brother, **Douglas Manley, David Coore** and **Bruce Golding**. But to critics who say the school was elitist, he counters that the school had a system that produced leaders. Whereas most high schools of the day organised their students only at one level, JC had two levels. There was a Junior house from age 10 to 14 with sport and other team captains, followed by a senior house from 14 upwards, at which point the

students would start over at the bottom, with the same structure. This two-tiered system prepared them to lead. “By the time I had left Junior house, I had been football (under-12 team) captain and cricket captain, learning responsibility and leadership,” he recalls. “As team captain you would help to select team members and so learnt management.” Bernal learnt something else - self-assurance. He admits to not focusing on academics, loving to spend his time with sports. At 14, he played on the Colts and Sunlight Cup cricket teams for JC. He also played tennis.

It happened that one day as he delighted in smashing the tennis ball past his opponent, a university student was watching. She was **Dr Rosina Wiltshire** who would become head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the Caribbean. He was not sure what led her to come up to him and ask how many hours of preparation he was putting into his studies for the coming GCE O’Level exams. This was fifth form. But he told her he did his assignments and admitted, at her insistence, to doing very little otherwise. Wiltshire told him he had to do a lot more to pass the exams. “Fortunately, it happened with enough time before O’ Levels and it saved me,” Bernal recounts.

Peter Phillips, Douglas Saunders, Jimmy Carnegie

Still, sport was good because it taught discipline and one had to train, he says. While talent was important, the discipline and training were critical. On his Colts team, Bernal was perhaps the only one who could kick very well

with both feet. That is because his father had told him he needed to and he practised and practised until he could. He remembers losing a tennis match in a tournament after being taught by the former national champion **Richard Russell**. “He told me that I lost because if I had hit 10 balls in practice, the other guy who beat me had hit a hundred balls. You get out of it what you put into it.”

Bernal was at JC with people like **Dr Jeffrey Pyne**, BOJ board member; **Charles Mills**, son of **Gladstone Mills** and **Dr Michael Coore**, son of **David Coore**. Ahead of him were **Dr Peter Phillips**, the current minister of national security; Bruce Golding, now chairman of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP); **Douglas Saunders**, current permanent secretary in the foreign affairs and foreign trade ministry and **Vaughn Martin**, head of Vanguard Security, among other well known Jamaicans. He remains good friends with Pyne, Phillips and Martin, he says. And he pays tribute to teachers like **Jimmy Carnegie** who taught him history and “made a big impression on us”.

At ‘A’ Levels, Bernal took the economics and geography prizes and went to the University of the West Indies really just to formally prepare for the course that had been set for him on his father’s verandah. This was 1968, a time of emerging social problems. Crime had for the first time become a social issue in Jamaica. In the United States, **Martin Luther King’s** civil rights movement was on fire. Across the globe in Africa, the anti-colonial liberation movement had gained momentum, especially in Mozambique and Angola, and echoes of its battle cries had come ashore in Jamaica. It was also the era of the black power movement and the UWI was caught in the throes of

it. Rastafarianism had emerged as a major influence on Jamaican society and many middle class homes mourned the loss of their bright and beautiful sons and daughters to its magnetic appeal. It was the time of *The Abeng* and the New World Movement. No one who lived through it could remain untouched.

George Beckford, Norman Girvan, Trevor Munroe, Walter Rodney

Bernal learnt at the feet of some of Jamaica's and the region's brightest: **George Beckford, Norman Girvan, C Y Thomas, Walter Rodney**, the Guyanese who would be banned by the **Hugh Lawson Shearer**-led JLP administration, **Orlando Patterson, Trevor Munroe, Kamau Brathwaite**, the all-star list was endless.

Importantly, those lecturers reinforced in Bernal the notion of selfless service to country and fellowman. The basic idea was that they had been fortunate enough to get a good education and it was their social duty to contribute to the upliftment of the less privileged by changing the society for the better.

Bernal recalls that on the first day he turned up for classes at UWI, in October 1968, it was to walk into a huge demonstration at the Mona Road entrance. Students were up in arms over the banning of Walter Rodney. He joined the demonstration and marched to Jamaica House, Gordon House where they were dispersed with teargas and the finance ministry.

Pursuing a degree in economics, Bernal studied regional economic history and accounting, the latter would justify

itself when he later entered banking. At the UWI, he lived on Taylor Hall, recalling that in those days campus life was different and students wore gowns to dinner. On Taylor Hall also were the likes of a **Dennis Morrison, QC, Clairmont Kirton, Ian Randle** and **Dr Paul Wright**.

The fairest lass eyes have beheld

A year after entering UWI, he was doing a summer job at the Town Planning Department when he laid eyes upon the most beautiful girl he had even seen. **Margaret Ann Reckord**, daughter of **Carol Reckord** and niece of **Lloyd Reckord** of theatre fame, had just been back from the London University and was also working at the Town Planning Department. They were conducting interviews on recreational needs for a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) survey and she was his supervisor. She too found Bernal decidedly attractive but even while making him work hard to win her favours, she knew in her heart that she would be supervising him for life.

He took final year exams in June 1971 and got a summer job at the central bank. When the results were known, the bank offered him a permanent job in its Research and Exchange Controls section. One of his first big moves was to marry Margaret Reckord with whom by now he had fallen desperately in love. She has since bore him two sons, Brian, now an architect of extraordinary brilliance and Darren, a much sought-after computer systems administrator. He remembers going to **Maurice Berry**, his boss at the BOJ and saying timidly that he knew people who had been under a year at the bank could not get leave,

but could he get a week's leave to get married. Berry said a stern 'no'. But, looking at the despairing young man before him, told him he should take a different approach. "Next time, say 'I am getting married and I need a week's leave'," Berry advised him. He had never forgotten this lesson in self-assurance and bearing.

Alister McIntyre, G Arthur Brown, Gladstone Bonnick

After the incident with Berry, he thought about his own father who had tried to inculcate in him the need to be confident and self-assured. Daddy Bernal was a hard working man who believed that to every problem there was a solution. Those lessons would serve him well later in the dizzying world of high stakes diplomacy in Washington. He left the BOJ and went to work for **Alister McIntyre**, doing monetary economics, which entailed him traveling across the Caribbean to collect data. In those days, most of the countries did not have a central bank and one had to physically go to them to get files and extract information. McIntyre had taught him when he did his first degree at UWI.

In 1974, G Arthur Brown invited Bernal to rejoin the BOJ under his governorship. He accepted and became the youngest member of the administrative grade. It was an interesting time to be at the central bank. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had stationed a man at the BOJ. Bernal noted that the IMF representative was the only one there with a PhD in economics; everyone else had a Masters or a first degree. The Bank decided to send him to be trained at the IMF but Bernal had a desire to pursue a

PhD in monetary economics and public finance and applied to the top 20 schools in the US. But it was late in their academic year and only five were still open for applications. The first to reply was the famous Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

When Bernal asked the bank to finance his studies and he would work it off afterwards, he was told there was no such facility. But as luck would have it, he was referred to the National Planning Agency (NPA) where the man in charge was Dr **Gladstone Bonnicks**. Bonnicks had a PhD from Chicago and recognised instantly the usefulness of the programme Bernal wanted to pursue. He agreed without hesitation to provide him a scholarship. Bernal went to Wharton for a year. But at the end of the first year, he was looking to do a dissertation on economic development in developing countries. Nobody on the staff was interested in that topic. Determined to follow the path he had set for himself, Bernal switched to the New School for Social Research, now the New School University in New York. While there he met **Robert Gregory**, the head of the HEART Trust/NTA and he notes that **Dr Rosalea Hamilton**, the trade consultant also went there later. Was it mere coincidence or ordained destiny that shortly after completing his PhD, Bernal ran into George Beckford in New York. They both shared a taxi and Beckford asked his former student what he planned to do. He said he was not yet sure and he suggested he came to the university to teach.

About the same time, another former lecturer, Norman Girvan invited him to work as a consultant at the National Planning Agency where he was now the director. So he was teaching full time and working at the NPA. Girvan wisely advised him to specialise, in order to master an area and he chose to become an expert on the IMF, with special emphasis on its programmes in developing countries. The move was fortuitous. In the years to come, the IMF would be at the centre of Jamaican consciousness as the Manley government began a rocky relationship with the Fund that would lead to a crushing political defeat.

Meeting Michael Manley

In the late 1970s, Bernal got into government circles in the midst of a raging debate about a mooted non-IMF path. Manley's democratic socialist People's National Party had decided it could not stomach the conditionalities that the IMF was trying to extract from the government, in exchange for an Extended Fund Facility and its vaunted seal of approval. It would mean laying off thousands of poor people and risking social upheaval. Bernal was for the non-IMF path, finding the Washington-based Fund too inflexible. "It has changed now but it was very doctrinaire at the time," he says. He worked alongside **Dennis Morrison**, the economist and, importantly, came into contact with then Prime Minister Michael Manley and the leadership of the PNP. He did a lot of background work for Manley on international economic issues, including the South Commission and research for some of his books,

especially after the PNP lost the bitterly fought 1980 elections.

During that time, he developed a great admiration for Manley, saying of him that when it came to intellect, “it didn’t get any better”. “It was a great learning experience working with him and seeing how he did things,” he recounts. Manley would take him on some of his many trips or when he could not go himself, would ask Bernal to represent him. “That put me in good stead for the time when I would become ambassador to the US, even though I did not know it at the time.”

He is amused now when he remembers how after he had worked up to four o’ clock in the morning to finish a document for Manley, **Howard Aris** had called to find out if it was ready and to say that Manley needed it right away! He told Aris that he worked with Manley and not for Manley and would take the document to him on his way to work later in the morning. For now he needed to get some sleep. About ten minutes later, the phone rang. It was Manley on the line. “Richard, I know you don’t work for me and that you only work with me but I want my document right now,” Manley said. It was a clear order. “I got up and drove from Stony Hill to give him the document,” Bernal laughs, reliving the moment.

But he also found time to do other things, like writing for many journals, including a jazz review column in the now defunct *Jamaica Daily News*. For this column, the record shops would give him records “for little or nothing” and he built up a sizeable collection which he later gave to the *Radio Mona* at UWI. All this time he was still teaching at the university, remembering that there was only one phone

line in the Social Sciences Faculty and everybody had to share one secretary. All that would soon change.

From E Lloyd Taylor to Delroy Lindsay

E Lloyd Taylor was chairman of the government-owned Workers Bank and wanted to improve and modernise the bank. He fervently believed that a research department was critical to this. He articulated this vision to the board and they began the search for the right person. Someone said Dr Richard Bernal was the man. He negotiated a big salary relative to what he was getting at the UWI and a car. He got his own secretary and a private line. But not long after he arrived at the bank, problems began to surface. This was 1987. Many of the biggest accounts were closed, with money owing to the bank. The debt and interest amounted to about half the loan portfolio, a sure recipe for disaster. Workers Bank underwent serious reorganisation. Bernal was promoted to director of administration akin to a deputy general manager. A year later, in February 1990, he was appointed general manager. But when the bank was privatised to **Delroy Lindsay**, he decided not to stay and left in 1991.

Two years before that the PNP had won the elections and became the government again. Bernal was appointed advisor to the finance minister, **Seymour Mullings**, while still at the bank. One day after he had left the bank, the foreign minister, **David Coore** called him over and asked him whether he had ever thought of going into the foreign service. They were looking for someone who had a background in economics, knew policy formation, was

comfortable with the prime minister and his cabinet ministers and was on top of the issues of the day, to be Ambassador to the United States and the Organisation of American States (OAS). Bernal was seen as the right man for the job and Coore made him the offer.

Our man in Washington

He went to Washington and building on the work of his predecessors, caused Jamaica's name to be pronounced with pride. Hardly any decision was taken in the US Congress concerning the Caribbean without some reference to Bernal. Jamaican lobbyist **George Dalley** could hardly believe his ears when Bernal said he wanted to testify before the Congress on several issues of interest to Jamaica and the Caribbean and did. At one stage he was number three in the diplomatic corps in the US capital. Before leaving after 10 years, the longest period by any Jamaican ambassador, he had worked through a portion of the administration of **George Bush Sr**, the **Bill Clinton** years and a part of the **George W Bush** government.

He recalls being first out of the room in Cancun, Mexico when the World Trade Organisation talks collapsed and became the man to bring the bad tidings to waiting journalists, hungry for news. He was quoted for days by nearly all the major networks and media outlets in the US saying why the meeting had torpedoed and countering claims that it was the developing countries who were to blame.

With Margaret, a cultural consultant and gracious hostess at his side, he criss-crossed the United States, promoting the

island, delighting in the achievements of Jamaicans in the Diaspora and boasting of their audacity. “If I am to come back in another life, I would want to come back as a Jamaican,” he has repeated often.

In 2001 he left Washington and was immediately invited by the **PJ Patterson** administration to apply for the position of technical director, succeeding the departing Alister McIntyre in the Regional Negotiating Machinery (RNM) then headed by **Sir Shridath Ramphal**. Later that year, he became Director General when the two positions were collapsed into one, after Sir Shridath left. He is about to sign a new three-year contract in that job.

Richard Leighton Bernal lives to serve. And in the service of his country and people, he has found his true calling.

Next week: Patrick Lafayette – Journeys of courage in a world without sight

Send comments on this interview to desal@cwjamaica.com

Your View of the Interview

Grub Cooper

- I am Kris Cooper. I happened to read your article on my father and I am impressed at your ability to write...I am very proud of my dad and a lot of info that I read in that article I did not even know...I too am in hot pursuit of music but my main passion is fine and graphic arts. Many of the adversities my dad has faced I too am now facing. One day I'm going to write a book on my life but I have to find my true place first. I'm into everything, I have not found me as yet so I do

hope my dad writes a book, Maybe I can do the cover or something but...he is awesome and I am inspired.

Kristoffer Cooper, Miami
Kcooper30@bellsouth.net

- This is my first time reading your interviews. The interview with Grub Cooper, part 1 and part 2 was very sad, and also very heart warming. While reading part one, I could not stop the tears at times, I was very eager to read the second part of the interview. I was elated to read about the accomplishment of Grub and his brother Conroy. I will now continue to read all your interviews. Kudos to you, Mr. Allen.

Pauline V Smith, Englewood, NJ, USA
Mizjori@aol.com

- The interview on 'Grub' Cooper is fascinating. Again, thank you for a good read. Must tell you thanks again for the good job you are doing. It is refreshing to read an interview on someone's life, without feeling at the end of it that you have learnt nothing new about them. You are bringing out some rich history there, and I hope none of these interviews will be lost to future generations. In other words, my brother, save them in a safe and retrievable form for future historians!!

Warren Wint

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