



Eulogy

GIVEN BY

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AT THE

***FUNERAL SERVICE
OF SIR JOHN COMPTON***

On Tuesday 18 September 2007

at the Minor Basilica of the Immaculate Conception

at 1.00 pm

EULOGY FOR SIR JOHN COMPTON

As we would expect the eyes of the region, and indeed the world, are on our island nation as we gather here to mourn the loss and participate in the funeral ceremony for one of our greatest sons, the father of the nation, John George Melvin Compton.

In all cultures and civilisations when the leader of the nation falls there is a ritual of this kind which is in some ways uniquely symbolic of that nation. In the United States of America, for instance, in the military parade there is a riderless horse with the boots of the rider reversed in the stirrups signifying the fall of the Commander-in-Chief.

There is more than just ceremony in these rituals.

It is a time for reflection and a time for healing the wounds of the society.

It is a time for coming together and for unifying the nation.

It is a time and an occasion for making new resolutions for carrying forward the work and achieving the vision of the fallen leader.

As I reflected on the life and the passing of Sir John Compton the lines that kept passing through my mind were –

Home is the hunter

Home from the hill

And the sailor

Home from the sea.

Sir John and his family have always been associated with the sea. He sailed between these islands as a young boy with his beloved uncle Malins Compton and continued to sail throughout his life.

He has now come home from a long voyage. Not a sea voyage but a life's voyage. A voyage that spanned eighty-two (82) exciting, happy, sometimes frustrating, but fulfilling and fully satisfying years in which he made a tremendous contribution to his family, his nation, the region and I dare say, humanity.

He was by profession a politician of the highest quality, who won more battles than he lost, but was always magnanimous in defeat.

One hallmark of his political career was his persistence. To paraphrase one of Winston Churchill's famous sayings during Britain's darkest hours, he NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER gave up. Sir John's persistence is also symbolized by this quotation by President Calvin Coolidge of the United States –

**“Nothing in the world can take the place of PERSISTENCE
TALENT will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men
with talent
GENIUS will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb
EDUCATION will not; the world is full of educated failures**

**PERSISTENCE and DETERMINATION above all are
OMNIPOTENT.**

He grew over the years from an outstanding politician into a statesman of tremendous stature.

He was a Lawyer by necessity because it taught the skills of advocacy and emphasized the basis of a just society. Without laws the English philosopher Hobbes stated “*Life in society would be nasty, brutish and short*”. It also put bread on the table and allowed for a certain level of independence in a very uncertain line of business called politics.

He was an ENGINEER, not qualified in any university or certified by any professional body but through his sheer delight and competence in solving engineering problems and building infrastructure. The landscape of St Lucia has been literally transformed by infrastructural projects conceived and implemented by John Compton. The ROSEAU DAM, the EAST COAST ROAD, the WEST COAST ROAD, the GROS ISLET HIGHWAY, the PIGEON ISLAND CAUSEWAY, RODNEY BAY, the TUNNELS to CUL DE SAC, HEWANORA AIRPORT, and the CASTRIES and VIEUX FORT HARBOURS.

There was always a map near to hand in the Prime Minister’s Office – a working map, not a decorative map, on which he could pinpoint any road or road project with his right thumb.

He was an AGRICULTURALIST who returned to his farm at Mahaut every Wednesday where he grew a variety of crops including bananas which he

spent a lifetime fighting for. If you were lucky to visit him at midday on the farm he might have cooked his only menu item, a mysterious and exotic soup for which only he knew the ingredients.

He was, however, in the final analysis, what he was best at, a LEADER. He was a master mariner and sea captain par excellence and without peer who guided the nation with a sure and certain hand on the tiller.

And so at a very early age he took on the mantle of leadership and from the bridge of the good ship HELEN, using a combination of all the other skills, he steered this beautiful country into the modern age.

To understand the magnitude of this task one has to understand the circumstances of a colonial Saint Lucia and Caribbean of the 1938 era in which there were riots and disturbances against the conditions in these islands. The Moyne Commission Report graphically depicts the destitution and despair in the region. The result of the social welfare and political recommendations of the Commission was the beginning of the long road to progress.

The historical facts are indisputable, this was not a nice place to live in for the majority of our people. Poverty was rampant. Housing was deplorable. Saint Lucia was particularly vulnerable to water borne diseases such as bilharzias. The education plant was extremely backward. Secondary and tertiary education were for the very few. There were only two secondary schools and only one island scholarship.

People emigrated in large numbers to Guyana, Cayenne, Aruba, Curacao and in the 1950s to the United Kingdom. The task of developing St Lucia from

that position must have been a very daunting one. This was the background against which he entered politics in 1954.

There are three leaders who come readily to mind when one is discussing the development and modernization of small island nations. They are Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, Errol Barrow of Barbados and John Compton of St Lucia.

Arguably, Compton had the hardest task of the three. Singapore, though the same size as St Lucia, had a much larger population and a much better infrastructural base. Lee Kwan Yew was also able, given the culture and circumstances of Singapore to impose greater control on the polity, economy and society than Compton could even begin to dream of, even if he were that way inclined.

Barbados, though physically smaller than St Lucia had a larger and very highly educated population, a terrain which made communication and the building of infrastructure cheaper and easier to construct, and a system of parliamentary government dating back to 1639.

The story of St Lucia's transformation is the work of many people but one man's vision and persistence stands out. His knowledge of the physical geography, history and people of St Lucia was remarkable. *How else could he keep on winning elections into his eightieth year against younger, talented, well organized, and committed opponents?* The answer also lies in his approach to development. The development strategy which evolved in his thinking over time was deeply philosophical but not dogmatic, it was scientific but pragmatic and was underpinned by experience and great intuition.

I was greatly privileged to observe it at close hand and to be a part of it after I had been suitably academically prepared by that iconic Caribbean institution the University of the West Indies.

Fate has played a strange role in all of this and given two generations of my family a front seat in this development saga.

My father, Noel Venner was the Financial Secretary in Compton's first period in office and I was the Director of Finance and Planning in his second coming. The script went as follows, we would take up office in a year with an odd number – 1963, 1981. There would be some political turmoil – for which we were not responsible, and John Compton would come to power in the year with the even number 1964, 1982.

The year 1964 marked a watershed in St Lucian politics. There were very large crowds in the Boulevard listening to fiery speeches by personalities like Maurice Mason, Henry Giraudy, George Mallet, Hunter Francois and John Compton.

Compton emerged as the leader and began the process of the socio-economic transformation of St Lucia that would become his life's work. The phrase '*life's work*' is deliberately chosen as his application to the task of development epitomized the persistence with which he pursued his goals. There was always unfinished business as there was always something else to be done or something someone else was not doing right in pursuit of the goal. I suspect this more than anything else determined his decision to return to active politics at the age of 80.

This story of the development of St Lucia is a fascinating one and one which must be told with great care and a certain intellectual detachment. Many people have played significant roles and John Compton would be the first to recognize them even down-playing his own role in the process. But today, for his sins, as he would say, we honour John Compton, and those who are honest and objective could not deny him his rightful place as one of, if not the leading architect in this process.

I first really met him in 1982. Of course I knew him before that as the Chief Minister, the Premier, and the Prime Minister. My father was his Financial Secretary and they worked really well together. However, from my position at the University of the West Indies, first as a student and then a lecturer, he was THE ESTABLISHMENT. One of the odd things about him though was that George Beckford and Lloyd Best, two of the most noted intellectuals and anti-establishment figures referred to him very comfortably as 'John' and seemed to know him and get on with him quite well. That should have warned me about the nature of the man.

At the time of his second coming after he was installed as Prime Minister, I was summoned to the official residence at Vigie. We spoke for a considerable length of time about the very difficult fiscal situation and the development prospects of the country. At the end of the discussion he said to me that my father and himself had taken St Lucia out of Treasury control when Saint Lucia was a colony and that we would not be going to the IMF in an independent Saint Lucia. Thus began a friendship that has lasted for twenty-five years and in which one found oneself in a position to appreciate the vision, tenacity, sensitivity, kindness, passion and common sense of a truly remarkable human being.

My friend, Ausbert D'Auvergne and I were initiated into the Compton approach to fiscal management, development planning and world affairs and became very close to him. I got the impression that he was very anxious to give us his vision of the development imperatives and challenges which

confronted very small states like St Lucia, and that there were opportunities for such states if they were highly focused on their objectives. One of his favourite sayings was that in our policies we needed to use a rifle not a scatter shot. He in turn was very open to our thoughts and ideas and greatly appreciative of our technical skills. He had a certain self assurance and humility and no hangups whatsoever. He was at his very best among ordinary folk. We traveled throughout the Caribbean and to various parts of the world and carried on a constant debate on development issues. What was remarkable was that politics was never an agenda item.

Out of these conversations and discussions over the years has emerged a particular view on his approach to national and regional matters which I want to share briefly with you.

He was the Minister of Agriculture in the former government and had a lot to do with the banana industry. He saw the banana industry as the prime mover in the early development of St Lucia. It was a cash crop par excellence providing a stable and regular income to the farmers. It was a critical part of the land reform process allowing for the three main estates in the Cul De Sac, Roseau and Dennery Valleys to be divided up and distributed to banana farmers. It raised the standard of living of the rural communities and led to an improvement in their nutrition, their housing and their education.

A socio economic revolution was wrought in Saint Lucia by the banana industry in so much so that the sons and daughters of the banana farmers of Saint Lucia have become doctors, lawyers, engineers and accountants.

One of my children said to me that in school the students claimed that the letters FAR on the vans meant “Farmers Are Rich”

The improvement in incomes led to improvements in nutrition and the capacity to withstand the water borne diseases which were then prevalent. The banana industry he never failed to point out, provided a seamless distribution channel through the Geest boats from Micoud in St Lucia to Marks and Spencers in London which was a tremendous asset.

Compton’s general passion for water projects is an almost direct reaction to what he experienced as the parliamentary representative of the Dennery area. He recalled passing these funeral processions with tiny coffins of the children who had died from water borne diseases and malnutrition. This affected him greatly. Water had to be provided to homes directly or through stand pipes to get the people out of the bilharzia infected streams. With modernisation, urbanisation and a tourism industry the demands for water had to be met to facilitate economic progress.

Electricity was also critical to fuel economic growth and to provide access to modern appliances for a rapidly growing middle class. However, one of the benefits he always stressed was the provision of light for children in the country side to be able to study at night.

Road projects were of two types, feeder roads to get the bananas to the buying stations and main roads to link what is a topographically difficult

island divided into two by a massive divide called the Barre D'Lisle.

For the island to realise its full potential he believed that the two parts of the island should be physically connected. Hence his dream and proposition for a connecting tunnel.

A special part of the development programme involved the seaports and airports of Saint Lucia. Compton understood the historical and geographical importance of St Lucia and the port of Castries after the British and French had fought over this island and it had changed hands fourteen times.

The port of Castries was the eighth largest port by tonnage in the world when coal was the main fuel for ships. It was his contention that the commercial and shipping interests in Saint Lucia did not take advantage of the pre eminent position of Port Castries and lost the entrepot trade to Barbados even though that country did not have a deep water harbour. He then began an urgent and massive programme to upgrade all the seaports and airports of the country. This included the very successful and innovative consolidation of both these facilities under one authority.

To finance these developments required an approach to public finances and fiscal policy which was in part conservative and in its own way innovative. This approach was deeply influenced by the indignity of dealing with British officials when the country was under Treasury control. On a visit to London to negotiate development assistance Compton and his delegation were kept waiting while British officials went off to the countryside for a weekend. He

returned to Saint Lucia resolved to get out of Treasury control and to raise funds through the local banks for his projects.

On his return to office in 1982 the public finances were in a shambles and it took three long hard years to bring them back into balance. As Minister of Finance he gave a virtuoso performance in setting targets and supporting and encouraging his technical staff in tackling this challenge. There was what we referred to as the Compy internal tax. After the revenue figures had been produced for the budget, he expropriated ten per cent for his capital projects and suggested that we use the balance to attend to the rest. We were under our own IMF programme. He directed the Ministry of Finance to bring the budget into balance and restored government's credibility by meeting our debt obligations.

The name Compton was highly bankable in the region and as his emissaries we were able to get financial support from the Bahamas, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago.

I remember vividly a meeting with Frank Barsotti, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance in Trinidad when we were in particularly dire straits. After I explained the situation, Frank simply said *“go back to Castries and tell Mr Compton that we will give all the help needed.”*

He orchestrated the economic recovery by persuading the British to finance and provide technical assistance for a banana recovery programme which brought large returns. He found funding for financing tourist promotion to

fill the hotel rooms. He negotiated funding from the Americans and the Caribbean Development Bank for a massive road building and repair programme to create jobs and economic activity.

It was all very Keynesian, but he admitted to me that while he had heard of Keynes he had not read his book.

Once the budget was balanced, a programme of tax reform was undertaken to bring relief to thousands of people. As a result the level of compliance increased and more taxes were collected. It was a magnificent performance for which he was not rewarded at the polls receiving only a one-seat majority.

Sound public finances and a stable currency could sum up his approach in an area which he linked with sovereignty and independence.

The rule of thumb was that every year we should be able to finance more and more of our capital programmes from our own resources only requiring foreign assistance for the very large projects. This limited donor influence and gave more degrees of freedom in domestic policy and choice of projects.

Strong public finances and a strong common currency also limited the influence of the IMF and the World Bank. These two factors, with steady economic growth, also kept undesirable so-called financiers at bay.

I was once summoned to the Cabinet room by Mr Compton and instructed to refrain from showing annoyance and be quiet. When I entered I met two characters out of a classic Humphrey Bogart movie who were trying to coerce us into arrangements to access billions of dollars of funds. As they spoke

Mr Compton passed me a note which said “Meet the Jimmy Swaggarts of finance”. I had to squeeze my knees to stop myself from laughing out loud. After dismissing them, we went to his office where the delegate from the European Union was waiting for us. He said, “*Gentlemen you look as if you’ve seen a ghost*” to which Compton replied “*Yes, a ghost out of a movie with two billion imaginary dollars*”.

It is my humble opinion that he has been by far, based on performance, one of the most outstanding ministers of finance in the Caribbean.

One of his favourite words was opportunity. He was always clear that one had to seize opportunities. There was an urgency and restlessness about him when discussing opportunities. He launched a massive assault on the educational system and generations of St Lucians received greatly increased access to secondary and tertiary education. By the 1980’s, for instance St Lucia had by far the most students from the non Campus Countries at the UWI.

The creation of the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College which was the brainchild of Hunter Francois also had his full support.

His view in linking education to opportunity was that with a small population you had to have the most highly skilled and educated work force to be competitive.

The contradiction he never failed to point out was that you had to have meaningful and satisfying work to keep them or they either left or rebelled. Hence, the urgent need for economic transformation. Hence, the need for

OECS and Caricom integration, which he linked to the transformation process.

Independence, sovereignty, and economic transformation for him were linked, particularly for the small islands, with the success of the OECS arrangement. He played a significant role in charting the progress of this organization. In fact OECS was said to stand for the Organisation of Eugenia Charles, John Compton and Son Mitchell. They laid the foundation for the creation of one of the most effective supranational organizations in the international community.

The OECS was the successor institution to the West Indies States in Association (WISA), the transition arrangement for the smaller islands when the bigger islands went off on their own to independence leaving them in virtual constitutional limbo.

Compton speaks of the leaders of these islands returning to St Lucia from Barbados, which had decided to leave the Little Eight and go it alone. They were in utter despair until half-way across they decided things could not get any worse and resolved to put their own arrangements in place.

The OECS, as an institutional reflection of regional integration, is in many ways comparable to the premier integration arrangement the European Union and surpasses it in such areas as a regional court, a common currency and central bank and regulation of such subject areas as banking and securities, civil aviation and telecommunications.

Saint Lucia under John Compton put its full weight behind the OECS as did the succeeding administration under Dr Kenny Anthony.

Compton's commitment to the OECS can be judged by the fact that he seldom missed any of its meetings. With respect to the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank the records show that in his twelve years as a member of the Monetary Council he only missed one meeting.

In the wider region he was highly respected for his commitment to the CARICOM arrangement and his willingness to work with the leaders of all the other countries. The conferment of the Order of the Caribbean Community on him is testament to the high regard with which he is held in the region.

He was, however, dissatisfied by the pace of the movement, describing it as dancing the twist in which there was much energy generated but no forward movement.

In historical disputations there is considerable debate about the GREAT MAN theory. *Is it men or events who shape world or national history?* Richard Nixon in a book called *Leaders* claims that a formula for placing a leader among the greats has three elements – a great man, a great country, a great issue. While Nixon was clearly seeing this in a global context involving the great powers, in our circumstances we can assess greatness by accomplishments and the ability to resolve what is for us the biggest issue, that of our socio economic development. In this context the Caribbean is a very unique and contradictory place as Compton himself frequently acknowledged. *How could people of such great individual talent not play a greater collective role on the international stage?* Without being sanctimonious one could say circumstances have created in the Caribbean an extremely well endowed corner of the world both in its people and in its resources. Our

people have come from Africa as slaves and in the process survived the middle passage, plantation slavery and exploitative colonial regimes. The result has been a very resilient and creative people. Other citizens have come from India and China under indentureship and contract and have also made critical contributions. Some of our citizens came from Portugal and the Middle East and we always had the English, the Irish, the Scots and the French. We also still have some of our own indigenous people. Their collective contributions to the world in literature, dance, music, sport and scholarship has been out of all proportion to the size of population and the land mass. This island of Saint Lucia, for instance has the highest number of Nobel Laureates per capita.

Ordinary folk have traveled from these lands and made tremendous contributions in the Diaspora. The democratic traditions of the English speaking Caribbean are impeccable. We have had a process of electing our governments since the 1940s and 1950s, and governments have been changed with frequency. The losers have not been shot or exiled. That and the adherence to the rule of law is a tremendous achievement for which this region must be given considerable credit by the international community.

To go forward, however, there must be a harnessing of the collective energies and creativity of our people within each island and country and across the Caribbean.

John Compton tells a wonderful story of going to the country after winning an election and saying to a group of people that the communities must now mobilize to do community projects. The reply, half in jest, was that they had worked very hard last week putting their X's and now it was he who had to do the work.

This started a long discussion on expectations and opportunities, the role of the government and why the level of enterprise exhibited by our people abroad was not in evidence in the region. My response was that *could it be that the space we have as well as our institutions are too insular and confining and that we need to expand our regional space so that we could fulfill our ambitions within the region as an alternative to emigrating?*

My understanding of John Compton's position on this issue was that there was and is an inevitability about Caribbean integration and that we should get on with the job as no one is waiting for us and our people are voting with their feet by emigrating while other countries are leaving us behind.

I would like to believe that this resonates with the current leaders of the Caribbean. Prime Minister Gonsalves of St Vincent and the Grenadines has been an ardent advocate of our Caribbean Civilization and championed the creation of a modern post colonial economy;

Prime Minister Arthur of Barbados has been a consummate leader of the Single Market and Economy programme;

Prime Minister Douglas of St Kitts-Nevis has displayed a passionate approach to issues of Health and the HIV/Aids pandemic.

Prime Minister Mitchell of Grenada has with great fortitude taken on the task of resuscitating our fortunes in Cricket;

Prime Minister Skerrit of Dominica has championed the cause of youth in the region.

Prime Minister Spencer of Antigua and Barbuda has shown exceptional courage in trying to bring the public finances of his country back on track and restoring its creditability in regional and international financial circles.

President Jagdeo of Guyana has led the charge in the Agricultural Sector.

And last, but by no means least Prime Minister Manning of Trinidad and Tobago has put his energy, conviction and the resources of his country behind the integration movement.

Prime Ministers Golding, Gonsalves and Manning are all members of the Class of 1969 of the Mona Campus of the UWI and for that reason much is expected of them as they work closely together for regional unity.

We certainly are a blessed and talented people and we do have a great issue, our integration and development.

We need as a matter of urgency to come together as a unified collectivity of states to claim our rightful place in the international community.

I can well imagine our dear friend John Compton observing this scene with his mischievous smile and commenting to his wife Janice that now we have got them all here we must get them to agree to something substantial on the great issue.

Janice has been a worthy and wonderful partner for this restless sailor. A calm and soothing voice to restrain the passionate Compy. She and her children have provided an oasis and environment of quiet enjoyment and

happiness for him. Despite all we think we know about him he was a very private and even shy person in many ways. He was as down to earth and straightforward as any person who held high office could be. Ausbert and I called him *The Chief*, *Captain*, *Captain Marvel* and *John the Magician* but in the end I settled on Charles De Gaulle. During the Second World War when France was defeated De Gaulle would not accept defeat and literally willed France back into existence and sought for it a place at the table in international affairs. Similarly, John Compton used his tremendous will power to set Saint Lucia on the path to development.

Like De Gaulle he aged well and also like De Gaulle he was always ready to return from exile or retirement when the nation called.

In an age when knowledge and information have been acknowledged as the driving force behind economic growth and people are living longer because of advanced medical technology, sensible diet and exercise, Compton's return at eighty posed a very perplexing question for many.

He answered the question in his own inimitable style by stating that he was running for office and not the Olympics. In any case at the juncture he was as fit as many men who were half his age.

Milton Friedman and Peter Drucker, two of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century who recently died in their mid nineties were as sharp as ever and still writing quality papers.

Compton did not age he mellowed and grew wiser. He read widely and was one of the most informed individuals you could encounter.

This question of age has by no means died with him. The question is, “What will we do with the accumulated wisdom of those who live long lives in societies with small populations in a world driven by knowledge and information?”

It could be considered an act of poetic justice, the hands of fate and meet and right that he should die in office so that a grateful nation could offer him the appropriate accolades and honour in keeping with his tremendous contribution and service.

There is a book which for me sublimely captures John Compton’s life purpose and his passing. It is Ernest Hemmingway’s – *The Old Man and the Sea*. It is “*the story of an epic struggle between an old, seasoned fisherman and the greatest catch of his life.*”

Santiago the fisherman has gone without a catch for eighty four days. On the eighty fifth day he sails far beyond the shore into the Gulf Stream. There he hooks a gigantic fish, a marlin, which proceeds to pull him for three days. In the end he triumphs and kills the fish but on the journey back sharks attack the catch and despite the efforts of Santiago they strip the meat off leaving only a gigantic carcass.

Back on shore the fishermen marvel at the size of the carcass and for Santiago this is a triumph.

In his third coming, Compy might have gone out too far but in his marathon budget address which is comparable to Santiago’s venture into the Gulf Stream he gave a vision of Saint Lucia which caught the imagination of his people.

As Shakespeare in his play “*As You like It*” put it in that unforgettable verse,

*“All the world’s a stage
And all the men and women merely players
They have their exits and their entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts.
His acts being seven ages.”*

We too like Compy will play many parts and exit off stage as he has.

But after the play there is the judgment by the theatre goers and the critics, particularly the critics, about the play as a whole and each of the actors.

However, there is another judgment which is summed up in this quotation by Grantland Rice

*When the one Great scorer comes
To write against your name
He marks, not that you won or lost
But how you played the game*

In summing up the life of Sir John Compton one could state the case like this:

*If he was so dearly loved and cherished by his family
If he was so loved and esteemed by his friends
If he was so loved and respected by his constituents in Micoud
that he never lost at the polls
If the people of Saint Lucia have been so kind and considerate*

*of him since his illness and have mourned him so
sincerely since his death*

*If his political opponents speak so respectfully of him now that
he has passed on*

*If the political establishments, leaders of the region and people
of the Caribbean have been so fulsome in their praise and
affection for him*

*If the international community has noted his passing with sadness
and expressed its highest regard for his contribution*

Then I can only contend that the matter has been definitively concluded.

Fifty million Frenchmen cannot be wrong.

Anyway you turn it

This was indeed a great man.

One can only end by quoting a small verse on success.

*He has achieved success
Who has lived well
Laughed often and
Loved much.*

We shall miss him dearly and cherish his memory forever.

***K Dwight Venner
18 September 2007***