

THE SPIRIT AND IDEAS OF MAURICE BISHOP

ARE ALIVE IN OUR CARIBBEAN CIVILISATION

by

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[Feature Address Delivered on the Occasion of the Formal Ceremony for the Naming of the Maurice Bishop International Airport, at Point Salines, Grenada on May 30, 2009]

*Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown
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[FORMAL GREETINGS]

The spirit and ideas of Comrade Maurice Bishop, revolutionary icon and indomitable fighter for justice, popular democracy, and self-determination, are alive and flourishing, among the people of Grenada and the Caribbean. This extraordinary gathering at Point Salines embraces this anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist titan whom Grenada has selflessly given to the Caribbean and the world. This belated honour of naming this international airport in his memory, and as testimonial acceptance of his heroic contribution to its construction, is just and long over-due. The vanities of parochial, vengeful, and backward politics have at long last been exorcised from the citadels of the State apparatus. What we are doing today formalises a condition which has

been indelibly etched in the people's collective memory for quarter of a century. The outpouring of joy is palpable on this day which the Lord has made. Let us thus be thankful and rejoice in it.

From ancient times our people have been enjoined to honour and celebrate the lives of our fallen sons and daughters who have distinguished themselves in the service of the people. Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, and more particularly, the Funeral Oration of Pericles, in extolling the glory of Greece and the majesty of its heroes, resonate with aptness for Comrade Maurice:

“For the whole earth is the sepulcher of illustrious men, nor is it the inscription on the columns in their native land alone that shows their merit, but the memorial of them, better than all inscriptions in every foreign nation, repositied more durably in universal remembrance than on their tombs. For to be lavish of life is not so noble in those whom misfortunes have reduced to misery and

despair, as in men who hazard the loss of a comfortable subsistence and the enjoyment of all the blessings this world affords by an unsuccessful enterprise. Adversity, after a series of ease and affluences, sinks deeper into the heart of a man of spirit than the stroke of death insensibly received in the vigour of life and public hope."

Maurice Bishop was one such illustrious man who lived as a beacon of hope for the poor, the marginalised, and the dispossessed, bore his pain and struggles with a calming equanimity. Beaten on the anvil of experience and forged in the cauldron of struggle, Maurice has emerged as the embodiment of the political virtue of our peoples' quest for self-mastery. The stone which some builders had refused has become the head cornerstone. Now that the historical dust is settling, even Maurice's severest critics and political opponents must now recognise that he was one of the most outstanding sons produced by our Caribbean civilisation. Pericles had astutely commented in times of yore:

“Envy will exert itself against a competitor while life remains, but when death stops the competition, affection will applaud without restraint.”

The honour being bestowed today on Maurice Bishop constitutes, too, an historical reckoning; it represents the closure of a chapter of denial. At the same time it is symbolic of a catharsis, a cleansing, which purifies and unifies with an amazing grace. Those who are blind, can now see; those who were lost, have been found.

On March 13, 1979, at 10:30 a.m., on Radio Free Grenada, Maurice Bishop, a young man barely into his 30^s, Leader of the New Jewel Movement (NJM), delivered his first address to his nation as Leader of the Grenada Revolution. His opening lines were memorable, calm, sparing, and simplicity itself:

“Brothers and Sisters,

“This is Maurice Bishop speaking. At 4:15 a.m. this morning the People’s Revolutionary Army seized control of the army barracks at True Blue.

“The barracks were burned to the ground. After half-an-hour struggle, the forces of Gairy’s army were completely defeated, and surrendered.

“Every single soldier surrendered, and not a single member of the revolutionary forces was injured”

After detailing the efforts of the People’s Revolutionary Army in seizing State power, Maurice did something remarkable. He put the Revolution in the hands of the people. Thus, he intoned:

“I am appealing to all the people, gather at all central places all over the country and prepare to welcome and assist the people’s armed forces when they come

into your area. The revolution is expected to consolidate the position of power within the next few hours”.

Without popular support, the Revolution would have collapsed. Fidel was later to comment that Maurice had led “*a big revolution in a small country*”. Make no mistake about it, the Revolution and its popular acceptance provided the political foundation for the construction of the international airport at Point Salines.

Maurice addressed precisely this issue in a national broadcast on March 29, 1981, entitled “**Together We Shall Build Our Airport**” in the following terms:

“To begin with sisters and brothers, we must all be clear that this project represents the biggest and single most important project for our future economic development. In fact, as you all know, this represents the single biggest project ever undertaken in the history of our country. More than this, we must understand that the idea for the

project has been with various Grenadian governments for 25 years or so, a reality that can be proved from the existence of numerous airport study projects dating back several years. However, with our Popular Revolution of March 13, 1979, the People's Revolutionary Government set out with seriousness and determination to transform the dream of our International Airport into a concrete reality."

Without substantial external grant assistance, in cash or kind, it was virtually impossible for the Grenada Revolution to build this international airport. From which source or sources was the grant assistance to come? The so-called traditional allies, including the United States of America, were unhelpful. Indeed, the USA, to use Maurice Bishop's own words was in 1981 "*engaged in an all out massive and vulgar attempt to dissuade various countries from attending a co-financing Conference to be hosted by the European Economic Community aimed at raising vital financing*" for the International Airport Project.

At first, Maurice and his government received so little positive feedback from potential donors that he mused that the dream of its realisation would remain unfulfilled. However, solemn assurances of practical support and uplifting inspiration were to come from Fidel Castro, the leader of the Cuban Revolution, at the Non-Aligned Conference in Havana in August 1979 and again at the United Nations General Assembly gathering in October 1979. Cuba pledged immediate assistance in kind in four areas: Technical expertise, skilled manpower, heavy-duty equipment, and some construction materials such as steel and cement. In November 1979, Cuba started to make good on its commitment. The International Airport was thus on its way but much, much more was left to be done. Maurice's confidence in the Grenadian people, their Revolution, and their friends overseas, combined with determined, astute leadership, were the central pillars of turning the airport dream into reality. Maurice saw this

venture as a great cause; and great causes have never been won by doubtful men and women. He and his Revolution were not doubtful!

In time, Maurice built a coalition to construct the airport. Grenada and Cuba were foundation members of that coalition. Along the way they were joined by Venezuela, Canada, Libya, and some European and Middle-Eastern countries. I was in Tripoli in July 2001, when the Libyan government forgave the residue of the indebtedness of Grenada on the airport loan in the sum of US \$6 million.

Mr. Chairman, the commitment of the people of Grenada to this marvel of regional and international solidarity will be told ages and ages hence. Ordinary Grenadians of all walks of life volunteered their labour, free of any remuneration, on weekends, to assist in the construction of their airport. These volunteer brigades of free labour were more than matched by the absolute determination of the Cuban workers to give

life and meaning to Fidel's generosity and selflessness for which the heroic people of Cuba are known internationally. The Cuban workers toiled in comradeship with their Grenadian counterparts six days per week, twelve hours per day. Most of them volunteered to work on their rest days. One such Cuban comrade was Ramon Quintana who sadly met sudden and unnatural death on this very site when he was crushed, accidentally, by a piece of heavy-duty equipment. We remember, especially, Ramon Quintana, today. We send special thanks to his family and to all the Cuban people. We salute Fidel; we wrap his name in glory. Fidel lives forever in the hearts and minds of Grenadians, with a love that looks on tempests and is never shaken.

We ought never to forget that those in our hemisphere who were seeking to destabilise the Grenada Revolution and to sabotage the construction of this airport were among the same persons who had, a short while before, allied themselves militarily with the racist regime of Apartheid South

Africa against Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) and Augustino Neto's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

In that momentous struggle in Southern African, the Cubans in selfless solidarity with the freedom fighters of the ANC and MPLA, took on the mighty army of racist South African which was supplied by weapons from countries which sought subsequently to strangle revolutionary Grenada and its right to self-determination. The defeat of the hitherto impregnable army of apartheid South African by the Angolan and Cuban combatants at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale was instrumental in opening the prison cell of Nelson Mandela and paved the way for the founding of a free and democratic South Africa. What the Cubans did with arms in defence of the freedom of the people of Angola and South Africa, they did with construction equipment, building tools, expertise and labour at Point Salines in Grenada. We will

never forget Cuba's sacrifice, selflessness, and generosity of spirit!

Let us put this phenomenal achievement of the construction of the international airport in perspective.

During the Second World War, the British and the American governments entered certain agreements concerning the leasing of large tracts of land in the British Colonial possessions in the Caribbean. In several of these countries, the Americans built international-size runways and rudimentary landside facilities to accommodate their war planes. These airports were constructed in countries with a sufficiency of flat lands to make the ventures feasible, in engineering and financial terms, in a short time. Three islands were too mountainous to benefit from this war-time American effort, namely, Dominica, Grenada and St. Vincent.

After the Second World War the Americans left the British Caribbean to the devices of the British. And the British were, as always, uninterested in enhancing the region's physical infrastructure for sustainable development. After all, the British were the colonial masters in St. Vincent and the Grenadines for some 200 years, unbroken from 1773, and they built only two small secondary schools, one for boys and one for girls, one for each century of damning colonialism. Thus, it was never contemplated that they would build or contribute to building international airports in Dominica, Grenada and St. Vincent where the terrain and topography were challenging for airport construction.

Grenada had to await the Revolution's arrival to lay the basis for the practical elaboration of the International Airport Project and its implementation. Dominica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines were insufficiently revolutionary to launch such a project. Nearly twenty-five years after the completion of the international airport at Point Salines did an

anti-imperialist, nationalist, and patriotic people-centred government in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which I have the honour to head, in the evocative spirit of Maurice, , commenced the construction of the Argyle International Airport. It is scheduled for completion in the first quarter of 2012. As in Grenada, Cuba and Fidel have been instrumental in turning our similar dream in St. Vincent and the Grenadines into a reality. In the process we are moving one mountain and two hills, filling two valleys, and spanning a river to build our international airport. My government has fashioned a "Compact of the Willing" for this purpose, comprising the governments of Cuba, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Austria, Turkey, and now Iran and Libya. The Government of Dominica led by my dear friend Roosevelt Skerit is on a similar path. We are following, in this regard, the road travelled by Maurice; a road less travelled by, and that has made all the difference!

Between 1979 and 1983, imperialism told enormous lies about this airport at Point Salines and was determined to sabotage its construction. Laughable tales that the airport was for military purposes only to facilitate fighter jets and other war planes from Cuba and the Soviet Union, were actually believed by supposedly serious people. Ideological blinkers and imperialist indoctrination made such people not see, or see doubles, as we say in the Caribbean. Ignorance, the mother of all suspicion, enjoyed a full flowering. A kind of "Midsummer's Night Madness" gripped the imperial ideologues; and those of a lesser light, invariably paid hacks of imperialism, voiced corresponding follies and fables about this awesome project. They must today hang their heads in shame! Do not expect apologies, only more sophistry and vaunted vanities.

One month after the triumph of the Revolution, Maurice Bishop put down his marker with crystal clarity in a national

broadcast entitled **“In Nobody’s Backyard”**. It is well with our soul to quote it at some length:

“We are a small country, we are a poor country, with a population of largely African descent, we are a part of the exploited third world, and we definitely have a stake in seeking the creation of a New International Economic Order which would assist in ensuring economic justice for the oppressed and exploited peoples of the world, and in ensuring that the resources of the land and sea are used for the benefit of all the people of the world and not for a tiny minority of profiteers. Our aim, therefore, is to join all organisations and work with all countries that will help us become more independent and more in control of our own resources. In this regard, nobody who understands present-day realities can seriously challenge our right to develop working relations with a variety of countries.

“Grenada is a sovereign and independent country, although a tiny speck on the world map, and we expect

all countries to strictly respect our independence just as we will respect theirs. No country has the right to tell us what to do or how to run our country, or who to be friendly with. We certainly would not attempt to tell any other country what to do. We are not in anybody's backyard, and we are definitely not for sale."

This fighting spirit, these noble ideas are what fuelled the drive to build this international airport; they, too, sustain us in our legitimate, on-going quest to further ennoble our Caribbean civilisation.

I cannot recall when I first met Maurice Bishop. It was some years prior to the Revolution, but we had known each other in revolutionary spirit long before that. So, we knew each other long before we met each other. In the decade prior to the Revolution I had come to the attention of the security forces of the region and hemisphere in the Cold War Era, not for the commission of any crime, but on account of my anti-

imperialist, revolutionary democratic, and socialist-oriented political activities. On October 16, 1968, at the age of 22 years, as leader of the Students' Union at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, I led arguably the largest protest in that country since the momentous and popular anti-colonial uprising of 1938. The symbol of our defence and affirmation of solidarity was the Guyanese scholar and revolutionary activist, Walter Rodney, who was banned by the Jamaican government from returning to his post as a university lecturer consequent upon his attendance of a Black Writers' Conference in Montreal, Canada. We were beaten and tear-gassed by the Jamaican security forces; and the leadership of the popular mass movement was vilified, harassed, and persecuted by imperialism and neo-imperial surrogates. Between October 1968 and 1979, for example, at one time or another, I was denied entry into several Caribbean countries including Grenada, St. Lucia, and Antigua. In December 1979, my work permit as a university lecturer at Cave Hill was revoked by the Barbadian

government and my residency in that country cancelled. I was, in the language of the day, “persona non grata” in the eyes of the established authorities. At one stroke I was denied an opportunity to work in my chosen profession in my region. I had a wife and child to feed. This is, alas, but a glimpse of those terrible days when the faces of ordinary men and women across the Caribbean were strained and anxious. Still as my Rastafarian brethren and sistren would say: “I and I survived and thrived; there is no malice, just the love of Jah from I and I.”

In Grenada, Maurice Bishop and his comrades fared worst of all. They were threatened with imminent physical liquidation, a matter on which no chances could be taken, given the history of barbarism against them and the working people by the regime of the day.

I shall never forget the morning of March 13, 1979. I was living at Paradise Heights near to the university in Barbados where I

was employed as a lecturer. My friend, a young St. Lucian student named Didacus Jules, who subsequently worked in the field of education under the People's Revolutionary Government and is now the Chief Executive Officer of the Caribbean Examination Council, telephoned me around 7:00 or so that morning and reported that the Gairy regime had been overthrown in Grenada, but he was unsure as to what had in fact transpired. Swiftly thereafter I ascertained the truth. I was ecstatic: Weeping had endured for a long night but joy had come that morning. God is a good God, yes He lives! A redemption song was being sung on the streets of Grenada, in the undulating valleys, on the hillsides, the plains, and beaches.

Within a week of the Revolution, Maurice invited me to visit Grenada. I did so on the second Saturday of the Revolution and immediately immersed myself in political work, under his direction, at his home where I was to be accommodated for a few days. There was so much to be done; sleep barely

encroached. In any event, when I was shown my room of abode, in which was located the telecommunications equipment, I knew immediately that the nights would be long and sleepless. Frequently there were noisy radio calls for "Papa Mike", the codename for Maurice.

The next day, the second Sunday of the Revo, there was a massive rally at Sea Moon in Grenville. I rode in Maurice's vehicle with him and his wife, Angela. Along the way, people lined the streets and waved in celebration with their revered leader. At the Rally, Maurice delivered a most substantive speech, on both domestic and foreign policy matters. A significant part of his speech was in my handwriting; the other part was in his own hand. I do not know if a record of it exists anywhere.

At the onset of the French Revolution in the late 18th century, the English poet, William Wordsworth, approvingly declaimed: "*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be*

young was very heaven." The Revolution's enormous strength and energy flowed immensely from the work of the young people who constituted one of its important bases and from which was drawn the leadership of the principal organs of the State and Party. In retrospect, this youthfulness was also a weakness in that at critical points, a more mature, reflective, and experienced judgment would have been most helpful. Certain errors, even tragedies, could have been avoided.

Like me, most of the supporters of, and activists in, the Revolution have now lived more years than we have remaining to live. If Maurice were physically with us today, he would be sixty-five years old. He has his name on his airport before his 70th birthday, the proverbial three score and ten years. That is a cause for rejoicing.

I last saw Maurice alive in February 1983. I was passing through Grenada to get a ride on a plane going to Cuba for

a celebration of the life and work of José Martí, the Cuban patriot and national hero. I spent the entire night in Maurice's company. I attended some functions with him that evening, including one at Point Salines where the Cuban engineers and construction workers were engaged in building this airport. Afterwards, we went back to the Prime Minister's residence and talked through the night, mainly about politics in the Caribbean and Grenada. I spoke to him frankly about my unease concerning certain developments in Grenada and thought that the mass support for the Revolution was becoming indifferent, in important respects. He shared my concerns and we addressed possible solutions, strategically. As comrades we were honest with each other. One day I will write about all this, God's willing.

We agreed that on my return from Cuba we would continue the conversation face-face-face. This was not to happen. The Cuban aircraft took me to Barbados; LIAT was unable to get me to Grenada that day. So, I went home to St. Vincent

and the Grenadines. We kept in touch over the next few months, but I never saw my dearest Comrade and friend again. When he was murdered I cried uncontrollably like a baby. He still lives in me.

Thereafter, in the Eastern Caribbean, Rosie Douglas of Dominica, Tim Hector of Antigua, George Odlum of St. Lucia, and I, among others, kept fanning the flame for justice and freedom, for the further ennoblement of our Caribbean civilisation, and for the central struggle against imperialism. I eulogised Rosie, Tim and George at their funerals. I am the remaining survivor. I have to do their work and mine. I was never able to say of, and for, Maurice, as I did for the others, the heart-rending poetic lines of the celebrated Guyanese poet, Martin Carter, in his epic, "Death of a Comrade":

*"Too soon, too soon
our banner draped for you
the banner in the wind*

*not bound so tightly
in a scarlet fold –
not sodden
with your people's tears
but flashing on the pole
we bear aloft
down and beyond the dark lane of rags.*

*“Dear Comrade
if it must be
you speak no more with me
nor smile no more with me
nor march no more with me
then let me take
a patience and a calm –
for even now the greener leaf explodes
sun brightens stone
and all the river burns.*

*“Now from the mourning vanguard moving on
dear Comrade I salute you and I say
Death will not find us thinking that we die.”*

Maurice Bishop was a builder in the tradition of the Prophet Nehemiah. In his quest to fashion a better society for his people he was tradduced by his enemies, day and night. He was a towering success; no one really remembers in glory or at all, his puny adversaries. In communion with his people and friends overseas, he set about building this international airport in a focussed manner as Nehemiah did in respect of the wall around Jerusalem which was broken and in a dilapidated condition for 112 years. Nehemiah was mocked by his enemies; they were indignant; they were moved to anger and conspiracy; they tried every ruse, including violence, to prevent the wall's reconstruction; and, when all that failed, they sought to draw him out onto the plains of Ono to ambush him. It is all reported in the book of Nehemiah. Similar things were done to, and against, Maurice. But like Nehemiah, he and his people prevailed. A committed people, properly led for noble purposes, will

always triumph. Maurice's life and work taught us this splendid lesson.

Ladies and gentlemen, this ceremony would not have been possible had the people of Grenada not elected a government which pledged to do exactly what is now being done. The Grenadian people have given their overwhelming permission and approval for what is now being done in their name. In the process, an historic wrong has been righted. Today Grenada stands tall in this region and the world for this profound act of historical reclamation in which you the people view your collective achievements of the past through the prism of your own eyes and not by way of an externally-imposed imperial perspective, amidst local vanities and grudges.

Let us face it squarely, this ceremony would not have been possible without the advocacy and approval, the imprimatur, of a most humble but remarkable patriot known

as Tillman Thomas, the distinguished Prime Minister of Grenada. My friend and brother, Tillman, is courageous and devoid of malice or bitterness. This easy-going but battle-hardened warrior and visionary was imprisoned by the People's Revolutionary Government headed by Comrade Maurice. I have spoken to Tillman, more than once, about his experiences in this regard. He bears no hatred for, or ill-will to those who caused him and his family much pain and suffering. He looks forward with hope and optimism; not backwards with hurt and anguish. His Christian fortitude and love for people have touched me most deeply. His calming presence induces you to love him dearly. Grenada is blessed to have such a leader at this time. His joyous hopefulness will always endure beyond a debilitating learned hopelessness and helplessness.

The people of Grenada, in a spirit of reconciliation, have shone a light of the most illuminating clarity in the interest of

their humanisation. In their actions they have accepted the poetic summation of the Caribbean poet, Daniel Williams:

*“We are all time;
Yet only the future is ours
To desecrate.
The present is the past,
And the past
Our fathers’ mischief.”*

This naming of the Maurice Bishop International Airport is an act of the Grenadian people coming home to themselves out of their agony and compromises, their pain and joys, and their triumphs and defeats of the past. It has been an uplifting and redemptive journey. One of my favourite poets, the great Vincentian “Shake” Keane, puts it all well in his poem “Private Prayer” written in 1973 on the occasion of the publication of Walter Rodney’s path-breaking volume, How Europe Under-developed Africa:

*"To understand
How the whole thing run
I have to ask my parents
And even my daughter and son*

*"To understand the form
Of compromise I am
I must in my own voice ask
How the whole thing run*

*"To ask
Why I don't dream
In the same language I live in
I must rise up
Among syllables of my parents
In the land which I am
And form
A whole daughter a whole son
Out of the compromise
Which I am*

*"To understand history
I have to come home"*

We have come home. Grenada and Maurice have come home symbolically and in reality. I thank you and Almighty God for being present here. I feel infused by the spirit of Comrade Maurice; I believe that each of us feels it. It is a noise in our blood, an echo in our bones.

Thank you!

Forward Ever! Backward Never!