

Errol Barrow and the Mirror Image Speech

The following is a letter from Mr. Damian MacBride, former press secretary to former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown.

Twenty-five years ago today, one of my heroes, Errol Barrow died at the age of 67. His was an incredible life. Born and educated in Barbados, he gave up his academic career aged 20 to join the RAF. He survived more than 45 bombing missions over mainland Europe, rising to the rank of Flying Officer and serving on the private plane of future Air Marshal Sholto Douglas. He trained for the Bar in London, but returned to Barbados in 1950 to embark on a career in politics.

And what a career: founder of the Democratic Labour Party; Premier in 1961; and – after leading Barbados to peaceful independence in 1966 – its first Prime Minister. His first period in office saw a raft of social and economic reforms, from funding free universal secondary education to masterminding economic cooperation and free trade between the Caribbean islands. He left office in 1976, and after a period out of politics and away from Barbados, he returned, more radical than ever and a fierce critic of American influence in the region.

On 13th May 1986, two weeks before the general election, he stood on a DLP platform as candidate for Prime Minister, and delivered the “Mirror Image” speech, one of the greatest of all political speeches. It is great not just because of the marvellous rhetorical technique, not just because of the easy mix of the homespun and the firebrand, and not even because of the hilarious ending (“Anyhow, ladies and gentlemen, I done”).

For me, it is great most of all because it seems unimaginable that any politician of our age would have the courage and belief to make a speech essentially berating the people of his country, criticising their attitude and ambition, let alone do so two weeks before an election. And yet, he won a massive victory, the DLP winning all but 3 of the 27 Assembly seats. He died just over a year later, but his legacy survives to this day.

Here are edited extracts from the “Mirror Image” speech, 13th May 1986:

What I wish to speak to you about very briefly here this evening is about you. About yourself.

I want to know what kind of mirror image do you have of yourself? Do you really like yourselves? There are too many people in Barbados who despise themselves and their dislike of themselves reflects itself in their dislike of other people.

Now what has bothered me in this society is that every time after elections, people expect certain things to take place. And although the law says that he that giveth is as much guilty of bribery and corruption under the Corrupt Practices Act as he that receiveth, we know that even on polling day, people were given envelopes with \$100 bills in them.

So what kind of mirror image would you have of yourself? If there are corrupt ministers in Barbados tonight, you have made them corrupt.

I am not trying to make any excuses for you, but I realise what has happened in this society. I look around and see people who have not done an honest day's work in their whole lives driving around in MP cars, having an ostentatious standard of living, unlike my poor families in St. John, who the Welfare Officer gives \$50 to feed a family of ten for a whole week.

What kind of mirror image can you have of yourself?

You so much despair of this society that your greatest ambition is to try to prove to the people of the United States Consulate that you are only going up to visit your family....And you are surprised when the people at the United States Embassy tell you that you do not have a strong reason to return to Barbados. And you are the only person dishonest enough with yourself to realise that you do not have a strong reason to return to Barbados, because Barbados has nothing to offer you. You are not being honest with yourself, but you tell the man down there, 'Oh yes, I'm returning.'

When I went to Mexico, I had to make a decision, and I returned. I had a strong reason. My reason is that I did not want to see my country go down the drain but you who are not in politics don't have a strong reason.

Your ambition in life is to try and get away from this country. And we call ourselves an independent nation? When all we want to do is go and scrub somebody's floors and run somebody's elevator or work in somebody's store or drive somebody's taxi in a country where you catching your royal when the winter sets in?

What kind of mirror image do you have of yourself? Let me tell you what kind of mirror image I have of you. The Democratic Labour Party has an image that the people of Barbados would be able to run their own affairs, to pay for the cost of running their own country, to have an education system which is as good as what can be attained in any industrialised country, anywhere in the world.

In the state of Texas, the government of that state has asked to make the teachers pass an examination. To see if they can read and write! The gentleman of the Texas teachers' union came on the news and he said that he was proud of the result because only eight per cent of the teachers couldn't read and write!

If Reagan had to take the test, I wonder if he would pass. But this is the man that you all say how great he is for bombing the people in Libya and killing little children....This is the man that you all go up at the airport and put down a red carpet for, and he is the President of a country in which in one of the more advanced and biggest states eight per cent of the teachers cannot read and write, and he feels that they are better than we. And you feel that we should run up there and bow.

What kind of mirror image do you have of yourself? When a government steals from people in the way of consumption taxes and takes that money and spends it on their own high lifestyles, and unnecessary buildings, then that government not only has contempt for you,

but what is most unfortunate, you have contempt for yourself, because you allow them to do it.

What kind of mirror image do you have of yourself when you allow the mothers of this nation to be beasts of burden in the sugarcane fields? In Mexico where people suffer under a lower standard of living than in Barbados, they use donkeys to freight canes out of the fields; in Antigua, they use a small railway; but here the mothers of the nation are used as beasts of burden. What kind of image do you have of yourself?

I was inspired by the work done by the late Mr. Ernest Bevin, who went to work at eight – I don't mean 8 o'clock in the mornin, I mean eight years of age – and those dock workers in London used to turn up during the winter and summer from 5 o'clock in the morning waiting for a ship, and if a ship didn't come in for three weeks or three months, they wouldn't get any pay. And Ernest Bevin introduced the guaranteed week for dock workers. I set up a commission of enquiry into the sugar industry and made the examination of the guaranteed week for agricultural workers one of the terms of reference, and the commission reported that nobody gave any evidence before them in support of this recommendation.

What kind of mirror image do the people of the Workers' Union have, either of you or themselves? I had to wait until there was a dispute in the sugar industry and say, well these will be the wages from next week and...I went into the House and introduced the guaranteed wages for agricultural workers. Why should only one man have a mirror image of you that you do not want to have of yourself? What kind of society are we striving for? There is no point in striving for Utopia, but you do not realise your potential.

I lived in a little country when I was young, the Virgin Islands. That is a small country. But there is another small country. That country has 210 square miles; it is 40 square miles bigger than Barbados. If you took the Parish of St. Philip and put it right in the little curve by Bathsheba that would be the size of the country of Singapore.

But you know the difference between Barbados and that country? First, Barbados has 250,000 people. You know how many people Singapore has on 40 more square miles? Over two-and-a-half-million, on an island just a little larger than Barbados.

They don't have sugar plantations; they don't have enough land to plant more than a few orchids. They don't have enough land to plant a breadfruit tree in the backyard and nearly every Barbadian have some kind of fruit tree in the backyard.

They have developed an education system but they are teaching people things that are relevant to the 21st century. They are not teaching people how to weed by the road. They are in the advance of the information age.

But you know the difference between you and them? They have got a mirror image of themselves. They are not looking to get on any plane to go to San Francisco. Too far away. The government does not encourage them to emigrate unless they are going to develop business for Singapore.

They have a mirror image of themselves. They have self-respect. They have a desire to move their country forward by their own devices. They are not waiting for anybody to come and give them handouts. And there is no unemployment.

Is that the mirror image that you have of yourselves?

Anyhow, ladies and gentlemen, I done.