

# EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

## With Judy Hellman on the Jamaican elections

Michael Manley's People's National Party (PNP) won 48 of 60 seats in Jamaica's December 15 election, after a year of sporadic outbursts of violence and social unrest.

Judy Hellman, professor in the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program, who has recently prepared a column on Jamaica for *The Toronto Star*, comments on the election and the prospects for Jamaica.

By KEITH NICKSON

**EXCALIBUR** — In light of Michael Manley's landslide victory in the Jamaican election, what kind of society does he envision in Jamaica and where would you place Manley on the political spectrum?

**HELLMAN** — I would call him a social democrat. He is interested in looking for a non-communist, reformist road to very substantial social, political and economic changes. While he is very keen to distinguish between his party, his ideology and communism, the implications of what he proposes to do are very substantial, if not radical.

Manley talks about a total restructuring of the society. He said that Jamaican society was left, after the British pulled out, a society, "elitest in structure, acquisitive in motivation and psychologically dependant on North American and European values." Thus far, the social democratic reforms he has instituted really amount to some government spending on housing and medical services, the extension of free public education, a broad adult literacy campaign, the development of some agricultural cooperatives and, of course, government expenditures to increase employment opportunities.

These reforms, to my mind, do not amount to radical social changes but they do show that the Jamaican leaders are taking the first steps in the right direction. More important, the level of consciousness that these steps have aroused in Jamaicans is remarkable to observe. I don't think that anyone could have predicted in a few short years that people from that particular political culture would have become so highly politicized, so very ready for radical change.

On the international level, Manley is attempting to move away from dependency on the US. In order to do that he has done what many other Third World countries have done, and that is to look to his neighbours to see if he can find more appropriate trading partners. So he looked to the traditional Caribbean Common Market partners of Barbados, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and a little bit beyond to the major powers of the Caribbean basin which are Mexico, Venezuela and of course Cuba.

It has been this last relationship that has provoked the most controversy. In 1976 we witnessed the arrival in Jamaica of hundreds of Cubans who were on hand to advise and assist in the construction of schools, clinics, housing projects and daycare centres. The Cubans have the technology to build these things using labour intensive methods and this is what they have shared with the Jamaicans. This presence in Jamaica has prompted rumours that Manley means to turn Jamaica into a Cuban satellite or into a second Cuba.

I think Manley would like to but I think he's far from doing it. He would like to emulate the achievements of the Cuban revolution but I don't think the lesson is lost on him that those achievements were won in Cuba under a system that is substantially different from the parliamentary system that he has promised his countrymen he will maintain.

**EXCALIBUR** — Is Manley's type of quiet, legislative revolution possible in light of Allende's failure in Chile?

**HELLMAN** — It's going to be very difficult. If we look for elements that might prompt some optimism it would be these: the most obvious difference between the Chilean and the Jamaican cases would be the role of the military. Up to the present the role of the military in Jamaica has not been

significant. That is of some help to Manley because he does not have to confront constantly the threat of military intervention.

The other element I would look at closely is the position, size and power of the national bourgeoisie in Jamaica versus what existed in Chile. One of the important things that has happened in the last two years has been the exodus of the upper class Jamaicans to other islands and to the US. This represents for Manley's government an economic problem since they are taking with them their capital resources. This also creates on a small scale a situation somewhat akin to that in Cuba where the potential opposition removed itself, and some of that is definitely going on.

I personally don't think that revolution can be made through legislation. Revolution is made at the very least by mass mobilization of the most significant popular forces behind revolutionary leadership. Then the legislation is the capstone of that kind of mass movement. This legislation will only be effective if the government is supported by the vast majority of workers and peasants.

Whether Manley is going to be able to command that kind of loyalty depends on the kind of leaders that the People's National Party throws up in the next several years. Crucial will be the willingness of those people to work as the Cuban leadership has done with great sacrifice towards popular goals.

**EXCALIBUR** — Do you suspect that Seaga and the Jamaican Labour Party were directly funded by the CIA?

**HELLMAN** — I don't know if they were directly funding Seaga. It's very clear that the American preference would have been to see a JLP victory. Whether bags of money were handed to Seaga in phone booths in the style of Watergate I would not like to say. But that money was made readily available to "common thugs" opposition types who had as their purpose the destabilization of Jamaica seems probable. I think that all that we know about CIA activities elsewhere would suggest that this was likely to have gone on during the campaign.

**EXCALIBUR** — Are the Rastafarians a significant political force in Jamaica?

**HELLMAN** — That's a very interesting question. People now talk about political versus religious Rastafarians, but I'm not sure I'd be interested in making that distinction. The significant thing is that throughout the fifties and into the sixties there existed this subculture of people who, through religion, said "no" to the dominant society. They didn't want any part of it and behaved in a fashion that guaranteed that they would never be co-opted back into it because their dress and their language made them completely unacceptable. They sought their future in a return to Africa.

The political significance of it was that they had made an analysis and decided that they lived in a corrupt and inhuman society which offered them nothing. The conclusion that their analysis brought them to or the plan for action was a return to Africa or a movement into one's own fantasy life through the use of marijuana. We cannot quarrel with the analysis that the society was corrupt. So we have to credit them with being a significant force because while they didn't present a practical plan for action they certainly helped a lot to identify the problems in their society.

What has been very interesting to me is that two or three years ago when we used to read a sympathetic book about Rastafarians, *The Children of Sisyphos*, the West Indian students generally read the book as something very external to them. Now, students read this and become extremely involved. Some of them are quite taken by the philosophy, others move beyond being impressed by the philosophy and feel they share the discontent but want to do something different about it.

I have the feeling that this change in terms of York students is clearly reflected in Jamaica and indeed elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Many people have affected various aspects



Bryan Johnson photo

**The Toronto Star ignored the fundamental issues of the campaign and focused almost exclusively on violence, racial fear and red-baiting**

of the Rastafarian style—either the dreadlocks, the wearing of a tam or the language and certainly the music and the smoking of ganja because they have identified to that degree. There is much discussion as to whether you are a phony Rastafarian if you affect one aspect of the dress or the speech and do not accept the whole doctrine. I don't enter into that discussion. I simply feel that it is significant that it has so broad appeal and has become part of that whole process of taking consciousness.

Reggae music is similar. What I have heard does not provide me with a prescription for political activity. Therefore I can't imagine that it provides Jamaicans with a detailed plan for their future political behaviour. What it does do, however, is express this outrage very poignantly and gives voice to the feelings that working class and sub-working class Jamaicans have had all along. Almost any Jamaican can turn on a cheap transistor radio and hear reggae which stimulates consciousness even if it does not provide a doctrine.

For a people who have been left with this very heavy psychological burden of a colonial mentality to have their "own" music, something that has developed out of the slums of Kingston is already a tremendous step. That they should have their own musical form that comes from an African root and is combined with Jamaican rhythms gives a focus of pride and interest for Jamaicans.

**EXCALIBUR** — During the 1972 election campaign, Manley went stumping amongst the peasants and the Rastafarians with a holy rod given him by Haile Selassie. In this election Bob Marley was shot prior to performing at a concert allegedly sponsored by Manley and the PNP. Isn't Manley trying to manipulate the Rastafarians to achieve his own ends?

**HELLMAN** — The man is a consummate politician and I don't think he's above demagoguery. But when I heard Manley speak in Toronto I got the impression that Manley is a mature person who speaks to others as if they were grown-ups. A lot of attention was paid in the Toronto press coverage to the shouting of 'Joshua' and the enthusiasm that Manley was able to inspire in the people. To me what was much more impressive was that the man spoke not in platitudes but in terms of an analysis of real life situations. He talked about the economy and the political situation in a very sophisticated way and was able to communicate very effectively. He spoke to those people as if they were adults and that impressed me very much because remember we were in the midst of the American campaign then. After listening to the banalities and platitudes that the Ford and Carter camp were turning out at a fantastic rate, it was refreshing to hear a leader talk to people in realistic terms.

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