

Faces of the Century

A Loose Cannon with a Pivotal Role in our History

(The Tribune, Millennium Supplement 1999)

One of the most enduring images of Sir Randol Fawkes, long before his knighthood was conferred, is of the rebellious Labour leader suspended horizontally between two policemen as they ejected him from the House of Assembly.

The then Mr. Fawkes looked relaxed as he formed a sagging bridge between the pair, his briefcase in his lap and a broad smile across his face. Once again, Mr. Fawkes had transgressed against procedural protocol and once again he was paying the price.

In those mid-Sixties days, before the PLP rode to power at the 1967 general election, Randol Fawkes was the bane of everyone's parliamentary life, whether they were UBP, PLP or NDP. He was the loosest of all loose cannon, a maverick who did things his way come what may.

At the time he was the only Labour representative in the House of Assembly, a man committed to promoting the rights of the working man. In pursuit of his objectives, he disregarded the niceties of debate to make his point and defied strictures from the Speaker's chair.

Yet this parliamentary "outsider" and political maverick was to become, albeit briefly, the most important politician in the land during the heady day following January 10, 1967.

His party's single seat, occupied by himself, was the slender thread with the potential to link PLP leader Lynden Pindling with the political power he so desired. But no-one knew for sure whether the unpredictable Mr. Fawkes would co-operate in unseating the UBP.

It was his “one moment in time” – a phrase later associated with Sir Cecil Wallace-Whitfield when he asked the people to give him the opportunity to rule – and Mr. Fawkes made full use of it.

For the first time in his life, he found himself in possession of real political power, something his fringe Labour movement was never going to achieve at the polls.

Shrewdly, the mischievous Mr. Fawkes bartered his casting vote for the one Cabinet post he always coveted – Minister of Labour – and Pindling was able to wrest control and establish majority rule for the first time.

The Labour leader was, therefore, a pivotal figure during those momentous events and will always have a place in history because of it. But, unlike some, he did not prosper from the quiet revolution that followed.

No-one believed the Pindling-Fawkes “accommodation” would last any longer than expediency allowed, and so it proved. When the PLP increased its majority, Mr. Fawkes was out. The political wilderness was familiar territory for him, and he was never to escape it again.

Over the last four or five years, Sir Randol achieved prominence again by campaigning relentlessly for a \$15,000 a year parliamentary pension. Typically, he ranted menacingly from the bar of the Senate and threatened to enlist the support of his followers from the straw market unless Senators gave his pension the nod.

During his protracted pension wrangle, Sir Randol was held to be in contempt of court after refusing to apologise for questioning the integrity of the appeal court president. No-one who knew him expressed surprise. The indiscretion cost him a \$1,000 fine, but he probably felt it was money well-spent for a return to the public spotlight which he once claimed with effortless ease.

Challenging authority had always been a Fawkes characteristic, and neither age – he was 71 at the time of his pension campaign – nor his knighthood (usually seen as the Establishment’s stamp of approval for those who have lived and prospered by its unwritten rules) had changed his ways.

Yet though he was widely seen as an irritation and a nuisance, it is hard not to admire a man who, in Walt Whitman’s words, marched to the beat of a different drummer throughout his political career.

Lesser men might have fallen in behind a leader like Pindling, keeping step while the going was good, taking full advantage of their changing fortunes, But Fawkes didn’t.

His election campaign leaflets – with the banner “Righteousness Exalteth the Nation” always emphasized his integrity and identified with the plight of the common man.

“Son of the soil, your friend and brother” he liked to describe himself, “I shall be your mouthpiece, a trumpet for the rights of the young as well as the old.” His proudest claim was to be founder of the free trade union movement, and one of the founders of The People’s Penny Savings Bank.

Clearly, while many politicians have accumulated considerable wealth over the last three decades, Sir Randol has remained a man of relatively modest means. His pension campaign seemed to confirm that.

Yet when he alone held the balance of power, wealth could have been his for the taking.

Miami Herald columnist Jim Bishop maintained at the time that the then Premier, Sir Roland Synonette, asked Fawkes to “name his price” if he agreed to throw his seat behind the UBP. But Fawkes said no. An instant fortune was no substitute for his good conscience.

The Father of Labour, as he is widely known, did what he felt was right. In so doing, he changed the course of Bahamian history. As he walks around the streets of Nassau today, many younger Bahamians are unaware of his date with destiny in 1967 and the huge significance of his decision to support the PLP.

But that decision, and his lifelong commitment to the labour cause, place him right in the forefront of Bahamian political life.