For Norman

St Augustine, Trinidad, May 10, 2014.

Brian Meeks

The power of philosophy, floats through my head

Light like a feather...

Heavy as lead

I used the Marley lyrics six years ago in a tribute I read for the Ninth annual SALISES conference held at Mona and dedicated to Norman’s work. After it was delivered, we met in the audience and he thanked me profoundly, and declared in typically demurring manner, that he didn’t recognise the person I was speaking about as Norman Girvan, but rather it seemed to be some long gone, highly accomplished hero. It was only then that the full tragedy and pathos of the moment dawned on me as it became clear that he would not be waiting in this gathering to give his usual comments on what I might say.
Norman Girvan was born in 1941 in Kingston Jamaica. The last child of Thom and Rita Girvan, he readily acknowledged that his father, who was the leading figure in the community redevelopment movement ‘Jamaica Welfare’ was a major influence on his future career. Equally significant was his time at Calabar High School - the Baptist-run institution on Red Hills Road. Taught by an outstanding cadre of teachers, among them notably, the novelists Neville Dawes and John Hearne, he would later argue in his autobiographical essay ‘One thing led to another’ that it was the inspirational faculty and small class size at Calabar that stirred in him and other students a tradition of critical thinking. Winning a scholarship to the University College of the West Indies in 1959, he arrived there, in his own words, at a time of great excitement. W. Arthur Lewis had been appointed Principal and the West Indies Federation had just been established. The best and the brightest from the English-speaking Caribbean had gathered at Mona and debates on decolonisation and the possibility of a Caribbean nation were rife. Among his peers were students like H. Orlando Patterson and
Walter Rodney and among the faculty, Roy Augier, M.G. Smith, Lloyd Best, Lloyd Brathwaite and Elsa Goveia. But perhaps the greatest influence on the young Girvan occurred when Trinidadian *homme de lettres* Cyril Lionel Robert James visited to give a famous series of lectures. James’s unique synthesis of West Indian nationalism, heretical Marxism and interdisciplinary cultural studies, the latter practiced decades ahead of the invention of the term, would have a lasting imprint on the young scholar. This trend continued when he proceeded to the London School of Economics to read for his doctorate and where, beyond the boundaries of the library, he was a member of James’s storied study circle that included, among others, Orlando Patterson, Walter Rodney and Richard Small. Girvan’s return to the Caribbean took him first to a position at St Augustine and as David Abdullah said wryly in his tribute at Mona last week, St Augustine can with some truth boast that he started and ended his work here and that Mona was but an interlude. But what an interlude! In the detritus of the Federal experiment, hope for a Caribbean project had rekindled at Mona in the
form of the New World Movement. At its apogee in the late sixties, New World was pan-Caribbean in its scope with a fortnightly in Guyana, a Quarterly out of Jamaica, many branches throughout the Anglophone Caribbean, in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora and with intellectual influence way beyond its organisational size. The trends in New World were eclectic, but generally radical and transformative in nature, addressing questions such as the failure of post-independence economic policies, Black Power and alternative, post-federation options for Caribbean integration. Girvan served as chairman of the New World Mona group from 1966-1969, a period in which he staked his claim as a foremost regional economist, addressing frontally in his book *Foreign Capital and Economic Underdevelopment in Jamaica* questions of the unequal relations in the Caribbean bauxite industry and the possibilities for more genuine development through policies of nationalisation, regional integration and international South-South cooperation. In the nineteen seventies, Girvan served at the UN’s African Institute for Development and Planning in Senegal before returning to coordinate a
UWI/University of Guyana technology transfer project. This led him back to Jamaica, where in 1977 he joined the democratic socialist administration of Michael Manley as head of the national Planning Agency. The early months of 1977 were crucial as, in the face of bankruptcy and a threatening IMF programme, Girvan along with his colleagues George Beckford, Louis Lindsay and Michael Witter, sought to consult, through a series of meetings and solicitations, the views of the Jamaican people on their preferred pathway for national economic development. The eventual proposal, lacking in financial detail, was never approved and the Government entered into troubling relations with the IMF which, with brief interregna, continue today. Yet, the methodology of engaging with the people to determine both short and medium term economic policy remains a template still to be apprised and utilised by the governments of the region.

Much of the rest is well known to this audience. After the Manley regime was defeated in the 1980 elections, Girvan worked with the UN,
only to return to teach in and later lead the Consortium Graduate School of the Social Sciences at Mona - an innovative, interdisciplinary programme, which has made its mark not only in its outstanding alumni, but in being one of the progenitors of my own Sir Arthur Lewis Institute for Social and Economic Studies (SALISES) of which Norman was the founding Director. In between and beyond, he helped form and initially led the Association of Caribbean Economists, served as Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States and concluded his academic career as Professor at the Institute of International Relations here at St Augustine until his retirement in 2010.

At this juncture, I wish to return to my earlier quotation from Bob Marley’s ‘Misty Morning’, a not untypical foray of his into philosophy, to suggest that the binary ‘light as a feather; heavy as lead’ might provide us with an entry into Norman’s own philosophy and its intimate connections with his personality, which made him the leading activist,
Caribbean political economist of his generation and a beacon on the mountain to those that follow in his wake.

Norman was light as a feather in his intellectual nimbleness and avoidance of either paralysing disciplinary categories or stultifying dogma. Go to his website *1804 Carib Voices* and look at the range of concerns that he sought to promote. From popular culture, to technological change; from the minutiae of trade agreements to the abstraction of Caribbean thought, from Latin American politics to greater Caribbean Integration, they are all there, belying the notion that the economist’s work ends at the boundaries of demand and supply curves. But equally, he was light as a feather in his recognition that the world was changing and new times demanded new tactics.

Thus, unlike the unrelenting caricature painted of him by a columnist in the Trinidad Express, suggesting that he was stuck in some outmoded nineteen sixties notion of dependency theory, Norman was far lighter on his feet, seeking to understand the dynamics of globalisation; the
way in which it had dissolved some boundaries in communications and 
trade but paradoxically, reinforced them in labour and migration; but 
always searching for openings and strategies that would ultimately 
benefit the people of the South.

Yet, he could also be heavy as lead in the consistency of his advocacy 
for the poor and the powerless. There is a mantra running through his 
work, both written and praxis and is to be found in his advocacy of a 
better deal for Caribbean minerals and an integrated Caribbean bauxite 
industry; for the full involvement of the Jamaican people in the 
formulation of the national economic plan; for the genuine 
transference of technology from the North to the South so that we 
might become makers of our future instead of just consumers of 
consumables made elsewhere; against the sixty-odd year, cruel, Cuban 
embargo; against the egregious exclusion of Dominican-born Haitian 
descendants from legal status, making them stateless; for a better deal 
from the Europeans than offered in the EPA, in order for us to compete
on a slightly more level playing field, without hands tied behind our backs; and for a greater recognition of the tenuous position of small states in the contemporary world with the real possibility of existential crises. Girvan’s mantra through all these is that there must be an ethic that undergirds human relations, whether at the national or international levels and at its essence, must be the notion of Justice: Justice for the poor; justice for the weak; justice for weak nations and states; this was Norman’s constant theme, despite changes in tactics from the Seventies until the present.

Yet, Norman was light as a feather, in his love for his family, for Jasmine, Ramon, Alexander and Alatashe and his nurturing presence in their lives, made even more remarkable when placed alongside his peripatetic involvement in the social and political turbulence of the contemporary Caribbean. I shall never forget the poignant letter he shared, written to Alex who was grappling with difficult exam topics, outlining the context and contours of his life and making history real
and meaningful in a brilliant, unprecedented way. And light as a feather in his willingness to listen, speak and work with a new generation of Caribbean activist scholars, both at home and abroad.

And, through it all, he was as heavy as lead in his unwavering commitment to Caribbean regionalism and his refusal to abide within the confines of narrow, insular parochialism. And here I submit two instances from the treasure-chest of my many interactions with him. I recall, perhaps some seven years ago, inviting Norman to a conference on Black Power that the Centre for Caribbean Thought was hosting at Mona. Unforgivably, we had scheduled it for early in the year and it clashed directly with ‘Trinbago’ Carnival. Norman wrote me a dry letter, which unfortunately, seems to be lost on a corrupted hard drive and which said in effect, “Brian, how on earth could you schedule a conference that clashes head-on with the foremost popular celebration in the Caribbean? Quite evidently I cannot attend!”
The second instance, I am able to quote verbatim. When SALISES was planning the Fifty-fifty conference to celebrate Fifty years of independence in both Jamaica and Trinidad, I had drafted a project proposal which sought to look at both Jamaica and Trinidad, but argued inter alia, that located in Jamaica and with SALISES Mona taking the lead, it would invariably lean heavily on Jamaican experiences. Norman read the draft and was immediately and critically alert. He wrote to me and I quote: “I have gone through the documents and it is indeed regional in the questions it asks, but the answers will be based on a study of the Jamaican experience and ends by stating that a study of the Jamaican experience will be the basis of formulating the direction of the future of the Caribbean. This of course will not be acceptable to others, as the Jamaican experience is in many respects unique; and there is too much of a history of Caribbean social sciences of “generalising from the Jamaican experience”...you are walking a tightrope between the insular and the regional but in the end you have taken the insular option...This may appear to be a harsh judgement. I
hope I am mistaken. You know I call it as I see it.” To which I responded:

“Thanks Norman. I take your sharp, pointed comments delivered in the best combative spirit as a call to action. I will work on this.” And to which he concluded. “Brian..this is what I call collegiality..Norman”.

I treasure these few lines, not only because they amply illustrate my point, that Norman was uncompromising in his Caribbeanness and advocacy of a regional project, but because it also reveals his doggedness, absence of guile, collegiality and indeed, his humanity.

Light as a feather; heavy as lead! I end appropriately with Norman’s words, this time from the 2009 volume we co-edited in honour of the New World Movement, which recalls his singular voice and captures that binary of flexibility and consistency, lightness and heaviness, far better than anything I’ve said. In critically tracing the history of New World, he concluded:

“Economic Globalisation does not have to mean a globalisation of the mind that detaches one from the specificity of local history
and time and place and experience. It does not change the fact that Columbus lied when he said that he had discovered the West Indies, because, as the calypsonian Shadow pointed out, he had only discovered some Indians who had discovered him. Columbus was the purveyor of his own truth; we have to discover and purvey ours. It does not mean that Bob Marley was not right in his call to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery, for only we ourselves can free our minds. Bob was singing a ‘Song of freedom’. New World was a song of freedom and long may we continue to sing it.”

And Norman Girvan’s life was a song of freedom. Long may we continue to listen and sing from his repertoire!

May 10, 2014