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REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF GEORGE BECKFORD TO CARIBBEAN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

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Mr. Chairman, it is indeed a pleasure and an honour to be asked to make a brief statement on the contributions of George Beckford to Agricultural Economics in the Caribbean. As you are aware, this request came at a relatively late stage largely, because Norman Girvan was unable to be with us at this Conference, due to pressing commitments at Mona.

On the 13th November, 1990, the Commonwealth Caribbean lost what I regard as one of its most valuable intellectual assets with the demise of George Beckford after a period of protracted illness. Indeed the entire academic community was saddened by his departure for the journey into the unknown.

Approximately two months before that date, I had the privilege of reasoning with George during a visit to Jamaica, as I have done on numerous occasions since joining UWI in 1968. This reasoning lasted over two hours and although we spoke about a wide range of topics, George was concerned about two things: (i) the apparent desertion by many of his friends and colleagues and (ii) who will carry on with the "work". On the first issue, we rationalized the reasons as to why that situation existed but on the second issue I assured him that he had given "*birth to many sons and daughters not only in the Caribbean but throughout the developing world*" who could carry the torch forward.

His academic career began with a B.Sc. Degree in Agriculture from McGill University in 1958, and continued with M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Stanford University in the USA in 1960 and 1962, respectively. His professional

experience spanned several spheres. Besides his lectureship in agricultural economics, economics and political science at The University of the West Indies and at several renowned universities in the USA, George served as an advisor and consultant to several regional governments, the Ford Foundation and the United Nations.

In terms of publications, the list is very long: some 8 books and monographs ("**Persistent Poverty**" - perhaps the most widely read), 11 special reports and 41 journal articles. To these we can add 19 conference proceedings and papers and 6 pieces of work which may be classified as other articles and comments etc.

Mr. Chairman, conference participants, you will agree that the above listing reflects a high level of productivity over such a short period of time.

In recognition of the above contributions to the general area of agricultural economics and societal development in the Caribbean and indeed the Third World, three financial institutions in Jamaica, namely, the National Development Bank of Jamaica, the National Investment Bank of Jamaica and the Agricultural Credit Bank recently launched the "**George Beckford Foundation**". I had the pleasure of participating in that ceremony in Jamaica which was addressed by a wide cross section of Caribbean intellectuals and designated individuals including, Prime Minister P.J. Patterson. The sponsors were of the view that the activities for the Foundation would serve to continue in perpetuity the George Beckford tradition of productivity and excellence.

A commemorative publication on the life

and work of George Beckford was also distributed to those present at the launching. The majority of my comments are extracted from this document and in doing so I have either quoted directly all of, or sections of the document written by Michael Witter. These are sometimes reinforced by some of my own. I would wish that all of us would gain access to this document because therein lies a summary of George Beckford.

Mr. Chairman, *"that body of economic knowledge and thought created by Caribbean intellectuals and thinkers, has a critical tradition that spans over 50 years"*. Within it and through it, scholars have analyzed the problems of Caribbean economies with a view to improving the welfare of the broad masses of Caribbean peoples. *"In doing so they have led the struggle against those well entrenched theories that justify and rationalize the persistent disenfranchisement and exploitation of working people"* especially in the Caribbean. Dr. Beckford was at the forefront of that struggle not only challenging the establishment but also providing alternative strategies and solutions as the basis for economic development of the Caribbean. These strategies can be found in his work in the area of agricultural policy and planning, general economic development and social transformation.

Dr. Beckford is perhaps best known for his work on the plantation economy and the Caribbean peasantry. With respect to the former, the general theory advanced was that the plantations have traditionally determined the pace of economic development in the Caribbean. In

the case of the second, he was of the opinion that *"the creative potential of the region resided in its working people, especially where the peasantry was highly developed"*. But quite often, such potential was denied because of the *"domination of the resources by plantations and other such institutions"*. Indeed had George Beckford been here with us these last two nights, he would have enjoyed immensely the creative genius that was clearly demonstrated to us in terms of *"playing steel band music on wood and the wide range of Caribbean dances"* performed by the youth of Belize.

As Witter further indicates *"knowledge to George Beckford came from the people, belonged to them, to the service of their cause and most importantly had to be communicated to them in terms readily understandable by them."* Anyone who knows George Beckford will recall that this indeed was one of his special skills not only within his own discipline but especially when he transcended disciplinary boundaries. It is truly because of this quality that his services were always in demand by the masses of Caribbean peoples.

Mr. Chairman, time does not permit us to enumerate the vast range of contributions that George Beckford has made to Caribbean agriculture, but as we face the new challenges of the social and economic environment that awaits us in the coming years, the foundation provided by Dr. Beckford and his colleagues will enable us to pursue the conceptualization, the research and the solutions to these challenges.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.