

New Cabinet Secretary Well Prepared for Tasks Ahead

KINGSTON (JIS) BY: ALPHEA SAUNDERS

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Ambassador Douglas Saunders brings to his new post as Cabinet Secretary, not just years of wide-ranging experience in the public service, but most importantly, an appreciation of the international environment in which the country operates, coupled with an appreciation of the perspective of the international community.

Affable and accommodating, Ambassador Saunders welcomes the JIS News team to the Cabinet Office at Jamaica House, as he sits down to talk about his 36 years of service to the country and how he hopes to contribute to, and participate in policy direction, as Cabinet Secretary.

Ambassador Saunders expects that his foreign relations background will be of notable use in his new post. "The world over time, in effect, is getting smaller. There are not many domestic policy measures a country can take, which do not have implications for the country's foreign relations. Domestic policy is significantly dictated by international frameworks. There are a host of Conventions covering almost every subject under the sun, and you are constrained by those, in terms of actions you can take domestically," he says.

Citing an example, he says the matter that is perhaps most pressing for Jamaica are issues related to crime and efforts to deal with it. "That is always constrained by sometimes contradictory pressures from the human rights lobby. But the human rights lobby is not a local phenomena, it is an internationally generated pressure.

Paradoxically, it was Jamaica, back in the 1960s, that had proposed the commemoration of 1968 as the International Year for Human Rights, so Jamaica is no stranger to that phenomena in the international context. It now seems to some that it is serving as a constraint on measures to deal with other pressing imperatives, such as crime," he argues.

At the end of the day, he points out, there needs to be a balance, as while Jamaica has its imperatives to address, there are constraints by way of international obligations, which the country has undertaken, "and we have to deal with that."

He says that in the formulation of domestic policy, it is useful to be aware of, or sensitive to the forces at play at the international level. "So hopefully, I will bring some of that experience to the national domestic policy making arena, and since one of the main areas of the Cabinet office is to seek to ensure policy co-ordination across the system, that kind of perspective can usefully be brought to bear," he says.

As it relates to new initiatives, Ambassador Saunders is cautious. "I don't, at this point, want to go down the line of any new initiative. I think that my predecessor, Dr. Carlton Davis, oversaw a period of very substantial innovation and initiative, particularly as it relates to the performance of the public service, transparency issues, accountability, and so on. I am not saying that at some point I may not feel the need for new initiatives, but I think at this point, the service needs to be given an opportunity to absorb all of the already implemented, already initiated modernisation efforts," he emphasises.

"In pursuing those initiatives already in place, one has to keep in mind that we are in a situation of, in real terms, diminishing resources, both financial and human," the Cabinet Secretary adds.

He tells JIS News that the tasks become larger each year for most ministries, without any corresponding increase in budgetary or human resources. This means that these already existing initiatives have to be implemented within the ambit of existing resources.

"A lot of the administrative processes are necessary. In terms of government procurement, for example, processes are now required, which did not exist maybe 10 or 15 years ago. It's an additional administrative requirement or burden on the respective parts of the civil service and one has to seek to ensure that we consolidate those initiatives and reforms, with a view to ensuring that they are fully absorbed into the system, in a way that these things are no longer initiatives of modernisation, that they become almost second nature," he

explains.

After graduating from the UWI in 1972, the new Cabinet Secretary joined the Office of the Services Commission, and was assigned to the then Ministry of External Affairs.

He notes that this system of employment in the public service was very useful. "In those days when you joined the civil service, especially at the professional level, you actually were employed by the Office of the Services Commission, which could assign you to any ministry," he adds.

After five months of being assigned to the Ministry, he was permanently employed there, and this is effectively where his career in the Jamaica Foreign Service began, and where he remained until taking up office as Cabinet Secretary on June 1 of this year.

Ambassador Saunders began his early years in the service as an Administrative Cadet and when he was permanently assigned to the Ministry, he became what was then an Administrative Officer, assigned to the Finance and Administration Division.

"I assume because I had done a management degree. It was the first time they had assigned a graduate to that division. I found, partly on reflection, that that initial stint has stood me in very good stead for the remainder of my career in the Foreign Service. It provided a strong administrative base. It provided a familiarity with the way the administrative machine of government works, which I have always felt was extremely useful to me," he says.

It is an attachment, the Cabinet Secretary says, that as Permanent Secretary for what later became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, he insisted on for new recruits coming from university. "It is not that you become an expert in terms of every detail of Finance and Human Resource and Administration. It does provide you with a basis on which you instinctively know when you come across certain issues, you have an idea where to look, where to refer somebody else to, or where to look for a solution to a particular problem that might arise in those areas," he points out.

On his return in 2002, from his last overseas assignment as Ambassador in Brussels, he assumed duties as Permanent Secretary and occupied that position until his transfer to his current post.

The Cabinet Secretary notes that he was Ambassador to Belgium and six other countries as well as to the European Union (EU). He also served in the United Kingdom (UK) as Deputy High Commissioner between 1987 and 1991 and acted as High Commissioner for 18 months of that period.

Ambassador Saunders says his UK assignment, in particular, was a most fulfilling period, not only because of the range and variety of responsibility, but the period during which he acted as High Commissioner, exacted certain demands of him, in terms of interfacing with the Jamaican Diaspora, "because the high Commissioner in London does tend to be the first level of interface with the various organisations, and the UK has a density of Jamaican nationals and organisations. I found it interesting."

"I have been to places and been amazed at the level of recognition of Jamaica and Jamaicans," he tells JIS News. This, he notes, is due to widespread embracing of Jamaican music and recognition of the successes of the country's athletes and achievements in the sporting arena.

Even on the political front, Jamaica has, over the years, managed to project itself as a country with clearly established principles governing its foreign relations, and is regarded by many as a leader in the Caribbean, Ambassador Saunders asserts.

He argues that Jamaica's relations have matured with major and traditional players, such as the UK, the United States, and some European countries. "Clearly, at the time of independence, we would have assumed responsibility for external relations, which were previously undertaken by the British. Foreign Affairs and Defence were two areas which we were not responsible for, until independence, notwithstanding gradual progression from various stages of self-government to independence," he says.

Ambassador Saunders notes that the country's foreign policy has had to evolve, as shortly after independence, Jamaica became a member of the United Nations and over time, has had to shoulder more responsibility for its external affairs.

"I believe that Jamaica's approach to international relations, has moved to the level where there is no longer any

significant questioning of our position or positioning, even in situations where some of our major partners may have major differences with third countries with which we have good relations," he says.

"Therefore, if any of our traditional partners may have problems with some other country in our hemisphere and even outside the hemisphere, it cannot automatically mean that we have a problem with those countries," the Ambassador adds.

For example, he says, the kinds of pressures which used to be applied, or questions which used to be raised, in relation to Jamaica's relations with Cuba and more recently, with Venezuela, has largely dissipated. "I believe that it's largely due to the fact that over time, countries have come to appreciate the underpinning of Jamaica's foreign policy, which includes essentially, elements which are central to the UN Charter, to which we are committed," he says.

Ambassador Saunders was born in Frome, Westmoreland, to parents who worked at the West Indies Sugar Factory. He spent many of his formative years in Kingston, completing his secondary and tertiary studies. He holds a Master of Arts (MA) degree in Government and Politics from **St. John's University**, New York, and a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree in Management Studies from the University of the West Indies (UWI). He is married with four children.

