

**REMARKS BY FRED MITCHELL MP  
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
BEVERLY HILTON  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
TESTIMONIAL DINNER FOR AMBASSADOR SIDNEY  
POITIER  
21<sup>st</sup> August 2012**

In December 2007, I received a call from our honouree. I was surprised. I had after all lost office in May 2007 so having regard to the way life usually works, I did not think that the relationship would survive the loss of the office. I always call him Ambassador.

He asked me whether I could come to Los Angeles to see him sometime, because he wanted to talk to me. I was again a bit taken aback and surprised. But I agreed right away. I told him that at the first opportunity I would come and spend the time with him.

I did and that was in January 2008. That is the journey which ultimately led to this day. The time spent together was remarkable: a tour de force of his history, his views, his life, confidence building.

Most of us who are in this room are Bahamians and Bahamians of a certain age and generation. I think therefore it is not necessary for me to say how large the name Sidney Poitier looms in the imagination and the minds of the generation gathered here tonight and in the wider Bahamian public. He is iconic. He is by far our best known son and yet the Bahamian connection is not as widely known in the world as one may think.

This evening's honouree served as Ambassador for The Bahamas to Japan from 1997 to 2007. He also served as our Ambassador to Unesco from 2002 to 2007. I was the Foreign Minister from 2002 to 2007 and so I got to work with him on official trips to Japan and to Washington. The work during those times merely reinforced the iconic nature of the man.

Over time, I have been introduced to his wife and daughters, one of whom Pamela lives in Cat Island her ancestral home and where she does a wonderful work. Last year I had the honour of attending Sydney, his youngest daughter's wedding here in California.

Today we are joined by this older brother Reginald and his niece Stephanie. Up to last year I used to represent them both in the House of Assembly. Reginald Poitier is 92 years old and I trust that this is a happy moment for him.

I first conceived of this idea late last year when it looked like we would once again get the chance to govern. I said to the then Leader of the Opposition, the now Prime Minister Perry Christie that we had to do something from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to say a thank you to this iconic man who for love of country gave of his time, reputation and talents. This small dinner and presentation tonight by our Deputy Prime Minister Philip Davis who is also the Member of Parliament for Cat Island is the fulfillment of that idea born almost a year ago. I am proud to be able to witness it. Our Prime Minister and the Cabinet support this action here tonight and hope to do more to honour Sir Sidney in the run up to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our country next year. Forgive me some nostalgia.

The nostalgia of my mother on a Saturday evening sometime in the early 1960s insisting that my brother and I go to the Capital Theatre in Market Street to see a Sidney Poitier film.

And then being taught as an elementary school student to sing Amen, the theme song from Lilies of the Field, the movie which in 1963 made him the first African American actor to receive an Oscar and which catapulted him into the stratosphere of stardom.

Fast forward to 1973 and Independence night and the lights are all down, and a lone figure is walking around the perimeter of the Clifford Park, the last man to arrive. As he walked the grounds, the cheers went up as he passed the crowd. I thought it was a theatrical moment, duly planned. When I accompanied him as minister to the same site in 2002, he explained that he was simply lost and had not been told where to go so he was simply trying to get to where he saw a light and a platform.

I have been fortunate in my life to have been adopted by so many people and I cannot know the reason why but I find myself immeasurably blessed by it all. I cannot explain why or what for but men like Lynden Pindling, Albert Miller, Arthur Hanna, Clement Maynard, Arthur Foulkes, John Dean, Dawson Conliffe, Loftus Roker. These were all people who were not connected with me in any biological way save for Arthur Hanna but who guided me along the way to whatever you see today. I said to the Ambassador, I add him to that group of august men to whom I am grateful and whom I could never repay.

They were all nation builders, shapers of the young minds that will shape our country's future.

Sidney Poitier has taken The Bahamas with him wherever he went. The books This Life, Measure of A Man, Life Beyond Measure tell the story. These books chronicle a remarkable story of a life that could not have been designed by a novelist. It is a compelling story that caused a judge in an action involving the Disney Company to remark after the Ambassador's testimony on the witness stand that his was a remarkable story. Remarkable indeed.

Some in this generation have asked what has he done for The Bahamas, and my answer is that he is. That is enough. Even the blind can see.

We are proud of this native son, whose roots are strong in Cat Island and in Nassau. You just read the books and you can see how the early years are central who he is today. I am very proud of you sir. I am proud that we are able to say this simply thank you from a grateful nation. I am pleased that our Deputy Prime Minister able to join us and as I take my seat, I say thank you from the bottom of my heart and from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for your specific work for us. We are proud of you. We say thank you. May you continue to live well and prosper.

I now call upon the Deputy Prime Minister to address us and to present the plaque.

Thank you very much indeed.

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