

JAMAICA  
NATIONAL  
HERITAGE  
TRUST



# BLACK HISTORY and HERITAGE

A Special Advertising Feature

## JAMAICA'S BLACK POLITICAL PIONEERS:

# Alexander Dixon and Dr Joseph R. Love

ONE HUNDRED and twenty-two years ago, on February 1, 1899, Alexander Dixon was elected to the Legislative Council at Headquarters House in Kingston. Dixon, a candidate from St Elizabeth, was the first black man to be elected to the legislature since the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865. Undoubtedly, Dixon's election opened a new chapter in Jamaican political history.

Alexander Dixon (1852-1917), a graduate of The Mico College, worked as a teacher before settling in St Elizabeth as a businessman. In 1896, Dixon offered himself as a candidate during the general election but was unsuccessful. In 1899, he stood as a candidate in the by-election and reversed his fortunes. This election was a stormy affair as Dixon was in uncharted waters and faced many negative commentaries in the newspapers for being ugly, unintelligent and lacking common sense, among other unkind descriptions. Many persons in the society were simply not ready to see a black man elected to the legislature. Despite the negative campaign against him, Dixon triumphed. In 1901, Dixon was re-elected and served as a member of the Legislative Council until 1904. Following the end of his tenure in the Legislative Council, Dixon, along with others, founded National Club, an association to examine the problems of Jamaica. In addition, he served as a member of the Kingston City Council from 1912 until his death in 1917.

Prior to Dixon's entry to politics, the Jamaican political scene was marked by apathy by its small, male electorate, dominated by whites, who were of the planter and merchant classes, as well as colonial officials and the governor. Blacks were largely outside of the scope of politics. In the aftermath of the Morant Bay Rebellion, memories lingered of the cruel treatment meted out to thousands of blacks, sending the clear message



This portrait of Dr Love hangs in the old Legislative Chamber of Headquarters House today, in memory of his contribution to Jamaica's blacks and political development.

to them that they should not aspire for political leadership. Blacks were hesitant in seeking to assert themselves as leaders, as they would arouse the suspicions of the authorities and possibly meeting the fate of Paul Bogle. Economic factors further prevented any possible desire for blacks to seek political office. Political campaigns were expensive, time-consuming activities. Elected representatives were unpaid and spent a significant amount of time travelling to Kingston to attend various obligatory meetings and engagements. Many blacks simply did not have the profile, status and financial means to enter representational politics. Perhaps the most important factor, however, which inhibited black political activity in the late 1800s was the requirements for vote. Following the Morant Bay Rebellion, elections were abolished but in 1884, elections were reintroduced. In order to be qualified to vote, one had to be literate and pay taxes amounting to £1 10s per year. This was too high for many blacks. The number of registered voters was 7,443 men, of which an estimated

50 per cent was black.

New conditions created an opening for blacks to play an increased role in electoral politics when in 1895, the voter qualifications were altered by the removal of the literacy requirement and lowering tax qualification to 10s per annum. In addition, the number of elected representatives was increased from nine to 14, that is, one per parish. Following the changes, the number of registered voters rose to 23,000 men, which included a larger number of less affluent persons who were black.

Several factors aided Dixon's historic election victory, including his own intense campaign strategies to hold meetings throughout the parish to target black voters, as well as advertising in newspapers and the support of Dr Love.

Joseph Robert Love (1839-1914), was a medical doctor and an Anglican clergyman born in The Bahamas, who lived and worked in the United States and Haiti before settling in Jamaica in 1889. Love initially showed little interest in local politics but eventually staged public lectures on a wide variety of subjects of a political nature. By 1894, Love started a newspaper, Jamaica Advocate, which examined the problems of Jamaica and took keen interest in the conditions of the black population. Love was convinced that blacks had a role to play in Jamaica's political life at the highest level. In 1895, he stated in the Jamaica Advocate: "Let the Negroes look around them in their parish, for a representative Negro, gather round him, and send him to the Legislative Council." To this end, Love encouraged blacks to be registered voters in order to elect their own representatives. Love's call for black legislators was followed by him publicly supporting two black candidates in the 1896 general election - Alexander Dixon in St Elizabeth and Joseph Smikle for St Thomas. They both lost.

In 1898, Love himself was elected to the Kingston City Council and this further lifted his prestige and profile in the public's eye. This he used in fully supporting Dixon in the by-election of February 1, 1899, which saw Dixon being victorious. Love heartily campaigned for Dixon by speaking at public meetings and publishing articles favourable to Dixon. Love's support and social standing gave Dixon's effort a massive boost as Love was much respected among blacks and whites. Opponents of Dixon severely criticised Love for his support of Dixon, who they saw as below the dignity of the respected medical doctor and clergyman. Love's support for candidates was not limited to blacks, but also for whites who shared his views.

Love had a broad political agenda for Jamaica, which included increased education for blacks, land reform, elimination of police brutality, race consciousness, equal rights and justice for all races, back unity and Pan-Africanism, and integration of qualified blacks into the civil service, among many other ideas. Regarding back women, Love stated, "The destiny of the Negro race depends upon the elevating of the women of the race." Dr Love advocated equal access of education for males and females. His goal was to uplift the back race and to challenge blacks to confront the racist and oppressive white minority rule in Jamaica.

Dr Love's involvement in Jamaica's politics was further deepened when he was also elected to the Legislative Council in 1906 for St Andrew and remained until 1910, when ill health forced his retirement. He was the third black to be elected following the election of Joseph Smikle in 1901. Love was the

consummate public servant. In addition to his professions in clergy and medicine, Love served as a justice of the peace, chairman of the St Andrew Parochial Board, Wolmer's trustee, among other civic and public organisations.



Alexander Dixon created history in February 1899 for being the first black to be elected to the Legislative Council.

Dixon and Love were pioneers for black Jamaicans in politics. They both used their public profile to increase the level of back participation in the life of Jamaica and played their small part in putting to rest the notion that blacks were not suited for political leadership. Headquarters House was the arena for their political advocacy at the national level. Love and Dixon thought it imperative for blacks to be involved in the public sphere in order to impact the decisions being made which would affect the lives of all. Both men were confident of the role

they had to play in the improvement of blacks in Jamaica and elsewhere. Love's career as a strident back activist and advocate eventually served as one of the early leading influences on Marcus Garvey.

The effectiveness of the political careers of Dixon and Love must be assessed based on the times in which they operated. The Crown Colony constitutional arrangements of their era limited their ability to fully implement policies to positively impact blacks. In addition, blacks were a minority in the legislature at Headquarters House until 1925. Despite their limitations, their pioneering efforts as legislators must be acknowledged as a monumental pillar of Jamaican blacks in the construction of a new Jamaica based on political self-determination and majority rule.

- Jamaica National Heritage Trust

FROM 1872-1960, Headquarters House in Kingston was the legislature of Jamaica (then called the Legislative Council). Several Black men sought to be elected and to impact the affairs of Jamaica as women were barred from politics. The most successful among them before 1944 was James Alexander George Smith (1878-1942), commonly known as JAG Smith.

JAG Smith proved himself as an eminent barrister by the early 20th century. At first, he served as a deputy clerk of court locally and completed his legal studies in England, where he earned several prizes for outstanding academic work. His entry into the legal profession in 1910 broke the glass ceiling for Jamaican Blacks. Previously, the profession was the almost exclusive domain of non-Blacks. His legal work further paved the way for many other Blacks to follow and rightly earned him the title of the 'people's champion'.

After establishing himself as a barrister of great repute, Smith successfully ventured into representational politics in 1917 following his win in a by-election for Clarendon. Then, each parish was a constituency. He remained a member for the Legislative Council for Clarendon until his death in 1942 by winning all elections and even ran unopposed in 1925.

Smith's political career at Headquarters House was marked by strident and passionate advocacy for the advancement of the Jamaican people, particularly the poor Black sections of society. His method of seeking to advance the agenda of Jamaican Blacks was markedly different from other Black leaders who either

used violence (Tacky, Sam Sharpe, and Paul Bogle), defiance and religion (Alexander Bedward and Rastafari), ideology, and mass movements (Marcus Garvey). Smith used his legal acumen, his sharp intellect, and fearless attitude to give unfailing attention to the affairs of the country. In so doing, he made an indelible impact on Jamaica's development and was dubbed 'The People's Chief Watch Dog'.

### AN OUTSPOKEN CRITIC

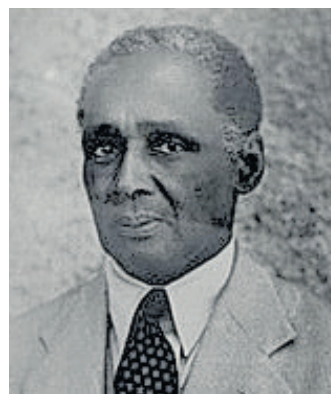
As an outspoken critic of colonialism in Jamaica, Smith opposed the assumptions that White Britain officials sent to Jamaica were above scrutiny and superior to local persons in ability and duty. He rightly understood that many were ignorant of the real issues of Jamaica and cared little for its development, but more about their salaries, returning to Britain and not having to live with the consequences of their ineptitude. Others were incompetent and corrupt while masking these with an air of superiority and sense of entitlement.

Smith's anti-colonial posture manifested itself when he clashed verbally with all the governors at Headquarters House during his many years as member of the Legislative Council when the governor was speaker and chair. According to Johnson, in his book J.A.G. Smith, Smith was reviving the longstanding tradition of the recalcitrance of the members of the Assembly, which lapsed following the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865. Owing to Smith's forceful advocacy and seeking to holding the governors to account, he was held responsible for the resignations

of two governors (Leslie Probyn in 1924 and Alexander Ransford Slater in 1934). Furthermore, he challenged others to do their duties for which the Jamaican people paid them (colonial officials were paid by the colonies in which they served and not by Britain). He also initiated no-confidence motions in the council at Headquarters House against governors because he viewed them as being incompetent or compromised because of poor judgement. These actions were significant as it revealed Smith's forthright persona. Since 1865, governors and colonial officials were never held accountable by anyone, especially a Black man. Smith's foray into politics lifted the knowledge, pride, and confidence of Blacks and made them aware that the aura of superiority of all British officials was hollow.

Smith's expert knowledge and understanding of parliamentary procedure caused two governors (Edward Stubbs in 1926 and Edward Denham in 1934) to apologise to him in the Legislative Council when they disagreed about procedural matters. This was significant. Both governors had the decency and grace to acknowledge their error. Furthermore, it pointedly displayed the extent of Smith's knowledge and the fact that the power of his knowledge caused two governors to apologise to a Black man, virtually unknown in Jamaica's history. Smith was known to make direct contact with the Colonial office in London regarding the affairs of

## J.A.G. Smith



This photograph of JAG Smith hangs in the old Legislative Chamber at Headquarters House where he was the longest serving legislator before Jamaican independence.

Jamaica and the stewardship of the governors. In so doing, he reinforced the point that the governors were mere employees and were subjected to regulations and guidelines of their employment and not masters over the Jamaican people as they were wont to do or be perceived.

The constitutional arrangement before 1944 held that the Legislative Council at Headquarters House had little control over the policies of the officials but were merely elected to scrutinise policies and pass legislation. Smith opposed this as he believed that elected officials should have more power to determine the affairs of government as they were the people's representatives, and in many cases, more knowledgeable and competent than British officials. To this end, they should be the majority members in the council. Smith had unwavering

confidence in the ability of Jamaicans to manage Jamaican affairs.

### A VISIONARY

JAG Smith was not merely an opponent of colonial policies, but had a clear vision of Jamaica's development and made several proposals, some of which became policy. Some of these included land-settlement programmes geared at the distribution of land to the Jamaican people for agriculture and housing; making teachers be civil servants thus raising their status, salaries, and security of tenure; equitable regulations of landlord-tenant relations; compulsory education for all Jamaican children; improvement and expansion of railway services; competitive examinations for public officials, island-wide water-resources management for the irrigation of agriculture and domestic use; infrastructural development; a pension scheme (eventually implemented in 1966). In 1919, Smith pioneered the Trade Union and Employers Liability Act, which later paved the way for trade unions to legally operate in Jamaica. For these deeds, Smith is regarded as the father of the Jamaica trade union movement.

Among JAG Smith's most important contributions to national life were his proposals for Jamaica's 1944 Constitution (adopted after his death). Many of the provisions of this important constitution were Smith's ideas, including the removal of the governor from the legislature, universal adult suffrage, and having elected members being the majority in the legislature, thus giving them more influence over legislation and policy. These

were very advanced ideas for his time and the first in the British Empire. The 1944 Jamaican Constitution was critical to the development of Jamaica's democratic political growth and maturity.

For much of Smith's 26-year political career, he was the most powerful symbol of Black authority in Jamaica, and yet he was never paid for his services to the legislature as then legislators were unpaid. Smith was a contemporary of Garvey, Bustamante, and Norman Manley, yet he never joined their movements. He gave assistance to Garvey and even helped to secure the release of Bustamante from jail in 1938. Norman Manley was his legal adversary. Smith never attempted to form a political party as his modus operandi was to act alone while giving and getting the support of allies inside and outside of Headquarters House. Smith's ideas were often published in newspapers, and he held regular public meetings across the country to communicate to the people and to inform them of the important issues of the day even though many who attended were not eligible to vote. Smith's actions were geared at preparing the masses for greater political involvement in the affairs of the state.

Many Jamaican Black icons operated on the fringes of political life and often branded rebels and villains by the established authorities and consequently, were often martyred (Sharpe and Bogle) and arrested, harassed, and ridiculed (Bedward and Garvey). In Smith's case, he operated from the centre of politics, Headquarters House.