

Ambassador the Hon. Dr. Richard L. Bernal (1949 – 2023)
A Memorial Tribute from the Institute of International Relations

It is with deep sadness that the faculty, staff, and students at the Institute of International Relations (IIR), The University of the West Indies (UWI), extend condolences to the Caribbean diplomatic and academic community on the passing of Ambassador the Honourable Dr. Richard L. Bernal (OJ), on Wednesday January 4th, 2023. With heavy hearts, we grieve with his family, colleagues, countrymen, the region and diaspora, for we have indeed lost a son who exemplified unwavering dedication to the region and personal and professional commitment and excellence.

A native of Kingston, Jamaica, Ambassador Bernal pursued an incredible academic and professional journey beginning with the attainment of a BSc in Economics in 1971 at The UWI, and culminating at the moment of his untimely passing, in a decades-spanning career spent in service to the UWI's highest ideals of teaching and research in a multiplicity of roles across various units and departments. After attaining an MA and PhD in Economics in 1979 and 1988 respectively from the New School for Social Research, University of Pennsylvania, Ambassador Bernal then broadened his scholastic resume even further with the attainment of a Master of International Public Policy in 1996 from the School for Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University. Returning to Jamaica after each stint at universities abroad, he would go on to serve his country as an economist, External Debt Management Advisor at Jamaica's National Planning Agency and Ministry of Finance, and in the dual capacities of Permanent Representative to the Organisation of American States (OAS) and as Ambassador to the US from 1991 to 2001.

Heralded as the quintessential Caribbean regionalist, Ambassador Bernal's persistent dedication to finding pathways towards diverse trade and sustainable economic development throughout the region earned him the positions of Director General of the CARICOM's Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM) from 2001 to 2008 and Principal Negotiator of the CARIFORUM-EU Economic Partnership Agreement from 2004 to 2007. As an ardent advocate for the voice of SIDS within international fora, through serving as Chief Trade Negotiator, Ambassador Bernal also led CARICOM's negotiations in the WTO's Doha Development Round and the Free Trade Area of the Americas in the early 2000s. During his tenure as Head of the CRNM, he engaged with the IIR on a collaborative effort towards determining a way forward to employ digital diplomacy regionally. Ambassador also made himself available for consultations with students of the IIR and considered them for CRNM-related international trade training programmes and researcher employment opportunities.

Although he was an eminent trade and economic development practitioner, and internationally respected diplomat, Ambassador Bernal will, however, be most fondly remembered by the IIR and the UWI fraternity for epitomizing rigorous scholarship at the highest tier, and consistently exhibiting thoughtful generosity as a teacher, mentor, and colleague. Lecturing in the UWI's Department of Economics, Mona, from 1979 to 1987, Ambassador Bernal went on to become Professor of Practice at SALISES, a Research Fellow at the P.J. Patterson Institute for Africa-Caribbean Advocacy, and from 2016 to 2020, holder of the inaugural post of the UWI's Pro-Vice Chancellor for Global Affairs.

Richard Bernal was admired and respected for his contributions in the areas of Caribbean diplomacy, engaging with the US, the EU and China as well as with major international financial institutions like the IMF, the World Bank and the IDB, also for his academic acumen and his ability to distil his professional and policy experiences into academic reflections. A prolific researcher and author, Ambassador Bernal wrestled with the region's most difficult trade, development and economic growth quandaries and applied his research and analysis to numerous publications over his career, books, journal articles, monographs, and policy papers. He is the author of a fine manuscript on Jamaica's foreign policy towards the United States, and a pioneering study of China in the Caribbean, among his many academic contributions. He had the not so common ability in his analyses to zero in on the geopolitical and geoeconomic strategic aspects of any situation, and to present sound, practical policy recommendations.

The IIR was incredibly fortunate over the years to have him accept invitations to attend and present at the Institute's seminars and conferences. This often culminated in his erudite contributions being included in IIR publications including the Caribbean Journal of International Relations and Diplomacy. With a keen eye on Caribbean-Chinese economic and diplomatic relations, Ambassador Bernal also collaborated with the Diplomatic Academy of the Caribbean (DAOC) to develop a module on the rise of China.

During Ambassador Bernal's tenure at Global Affairs and even before when he headed the CRNM, he engaged in several collaborations with the IIR. He contributed to fora and workshops on regional and global issues organized by the IIR in collaboration with other institutions, such as the ones about the regional implications of the Venezuelan crisis, China's engagement with the Caribbean and the implications for the Caribbean of the 2020 US electoral results. As always, his analysis was excellent, based on his former experience as Jamaica's ambassador to Washington, as Caribbean representative on the IDB Board and as a fellow at the CSIS at Georgetown University.

Ambassador Bernal was urbane, affable and had a fantastic dry sense of humour. He walked to his own beat. It was always good to meet and interact with him. He made a sterling contribution not only to his country, Jamaica, but to the entire Caribbean and a whole range of Caribbean regional institutions, most notably CARICOM and The UWI. The IIR salutes him and honours his memory. With sorrow, we say goodbye to a Caribbean giant. We hold his wife, children and the rest of the family in our thoughts and prayers at this time, and present our deepest sympathies.

Rest in eternal peace, Ambassador Hon. Dr. Richard Leighton Bernal.