

SIDNEY KNOX AND THE BIRTH OF THE CONGLOMERATE

Entrepreneurship and local industry in the heady days post-Independence

Businesses are usually founded by remarkable individuals who have vision, ambition and energy. They create institutions that outlive them and they, themselves, become legends.

One man to whom all of the above apply is Wilfred Sidney Knox, who may be seen as the most outstanding businessman in Trinidad and Tobago in the latter half of the 20th century. Following in the footsteps of Sir Gerald Wight, an entrepreneur and industrialist who brought brewing, manufacturing, shipbuilding and many other ventures into existence in the pre-Independence period, Knox, in company of a coterie of other young men who each operated within their own spaces, following in his footsteps, succeeded in putting into place the platforms that took an independent Trinidad and Tobago's business sector out of, and forever away from, the business model that had been established here more than one hundred years before.

That older model had been founded on the twin-islands' agricultural economies, grown from both the sugar and cocoa industries, which formed the bedrock of the society and shaped the culture and indeed the very nature of what is meant to be "a native of this place". These economies were buttressed from the 1930s by the dynamic growth of the petroleum industry, wherein as in both the sugarcane and cocoa industries, these islands pioneered developments of world-changing commodities.



Sidney Knox was among the founders of the modern conglomerates, which in the wake of the collapse of the Federation of the West Indies in 1962, worked towards and were partly responsible for the creation of the Caribbean Free Trade Association, CARIFTA, the precursor of the Caribbean Community and Common Market, CARICOM. Knox's larger-than-life personality drove this original, creative and adventurous individual, who shared in the modern entrepreneurial spirit that dominated the post-World War II period in the western democracies.

Knox's return to his island home after serving in the Royal Air Force put upon him the pressure of making the important career choices that many young men of his generation had to face. In his case, it was fate or fortune that took him into the engineering and motorcar sales firm of Neal & Massy, and placed him in the fortunate position of coming under the influence of a thoroughly modern individual, Charles Massy.

Knox's quick-witted, keen-spirited and ambitious personality, buttressed by a strong competitive instinct, drove his career over the succeeding forty years to the top of Neal & Massy and also took the conglomerate to its full potential.

With his drive and energy, Knox, assisted by a team of intelligent, resourceful and ambitious young people, ensured that several of the older family firms, if in name only, survived as a result of the conglomerate structure created by Neal & Massy. The acquisition by Neal &



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Top: The Neal & Massy Automotive Building, Morvant, in the 1960s

Bottom (left-right): Charles Massy, George Phillips and Ralph Gibson

Massy of several of Trinidad and Tobago's long-established businesses contributed to a much-needed feeling for security and permanence in the face of fast-paced and rather frightening political and social changes taking place in the country and the world beyond.

Continuity in business, perpetuated by Knox's business model, also ensured that international business contacts and goodwill survived into the post-independence period and beyond.

There cannot be any doubt that Knox's business model for expansion, and his pursuit of quality service and best practices in management in

Trinidad and Tobago and in the Caribbean, were of significant importance, particularly in the closing decades of the 20th century. He set and maintained the highest standards. Sidney Knox's vision and leadership style – brash, forceful, outspoken, peppered with the salty language that his sailor's heart expressed without fear or favour – have earned him a wide-ranging reputation as a no-nonsense businessman.

Some of his notable colleagues in Trinidad and Tobago's post-Independence emerging modern business sector were Ralph Gibson, who piloted the first take-over in Trinidad and





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Tobago when McEneaney's took over Alstons Limited, as such creating the first conglomerate; Thomas Gatcliffe, Chairman of Angostura and independent Senator; Nazir Ahamad, founder of Southern Sales; Ken Gordon, the Chairman of the Caribbean Communications Network; Geoffrey Inglefield, Chairman of NEM Finance; and George Phillips and Cyril Greenidge of Neal & Massy.



Their businesses – and the growing conglomerates of post-Independence Trinidad and Tobago – provided employment, improved working conditions and gave training and scholarships to their employees. All this contributed in no small way to the retention of the county's middle class, which served to keep the intellectual capital from migrating completely in the years after Independence and during the economic downturn of the 1980s.



Trinidad and Tobago's vibrant new private sector, which to a considerable degree was created by Sidney Knox, also served to raise living standards in terms of perceptions of quality, competitiveness, productivity, value and service: All necessary in the free enterprise system. At the 50th anniversary of Independence, it is our pleasure to bow to this truly great man to whom many thousands of us owe so much. ■

Top left: Sir Gerald Wright
Top right: Thomas Gatcliffe
Middle: Ken Gordon
Bottom: Nazir Ahamad